

the bilingual family newsletter

MULTILINGUAL
MATTERS

news and views for intercultural people

editors: sami grover and marjukka grover

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editorial

As a child I remember my brother and I driving Mum to tears by refusing to speak Finnish. She threatened to give up this “stupid” language project – she did not want to let bilingualism get in the way of the most important task at hand – living life as a family. We were flabbergasted. Showing an early feel for diplomacy, we immediately switched to Finnish: “*It wouldn’t sound right if YOU spoke English!*” we exclaimed.

Most bi/multilingual families will experience power struggles between family members over their preferred language. This is something that is touched on by all our main articles in this issue. Eugenia Papadaki-D’Onfrio explains that this is perfectly normal and to be expected, whilst Natalie Kramer tells how she has witnessed such power struggles in many families, some of whom have managed to successfully negotiate this tricky period, whilst others have found their language ambitions thwarted, or limited, by such challenges. Finally, we have an interview with Trevor Watt, whose reluctance to be seen as different led him and his sister to resist efforts to create a bilingual family environment, something he still regrets today.

As with any such issue, particularly with teenagers, there is no easy answer. A mix of subtlety, understanding, bribery and, occasionally, a firm reminder of who is boss may all help but, as always, it is up to each family to negotiate the right way forward for them.

Sami Grover

Multilingual Language Acquisition - theory and practice

Eugenia Papadaki-D’Onfrio



Research (Grimes, 1992) demonstrates that there are more bi- or multilinguals in the world than there are monolinguals. Yet, despite the wealth of research carried out in the last 40 years, there is still a considerable lack of awareness about how children acquire language and whether bi/multilingualism is desirable. The purpose of this article is to illustrate some prominent theories on first and second language acquisition, before looking at the main features of early bi/multilingual development, and recent research findings on bi/multilingual education programmes.

Scholars tend to agree that most children will acquire at least one language within the first five years. A language system is a puzzle with a variety of interlocking pieces: phonology (the sounds); vocabulary (the words); grammar (how words are put together); discourse (how sentences are put together); and pragmatics (how to use the language) (Tabors, 1997). Children are considered competent in a language when they have mastered all of these pieces, but how do they actually do this? Early language acquisition has attracted increasing research interest in the last 50

years and, initially, research findings were polarised around two distinct theories:

1) *The environmentalist/behaviourist theories*. Skinner (1957) claimed that language is learned through a process of stimulus-response-reinforcement. The child was seen as a “*tabula rasa*” to be filled with information. Although adult reinforcement plays a role in aspects of language development, as a general explanation of how language is learned, it proved to be an inadequate model.

2) *The innatist theory*, promoted by Chomsky (1965), offered an alternative perspective, later refined by the *Natural Approach theory* (Krashen, 1982), which claimed that all children are born with the inherent ability to learn language (a *Language Acquisition Device*). This could explain why children around the world learn language at the same age. According to Chomsky there are universal principles built into the brain which allow the child to analyse the language he/she hears.

More recent research (Halliday, 1973; Wells, 1987) suggests that early language acquisition is based on a complex interaction between factors outlined in the above two theories. This understanding has led to the development of the *interactionist theories* which claim that language learning does not occur in a social vacuum, as Chomsky seemed to suggest, but depends on cognition, as the child uses language to communicate with his/her environment. These more recent theories consider the child as an “*active learner*” with a strong inner drive to understand and make sense of their world.

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Bilingual Second Language Acquisition

Within the same time frame as it takes monolingual children to learn one language, bi/multilingual children learn two (or more) languages. Over 70% of the world's population speaks more than one language (Siraj-Blatchford, 1994a) so it is just as natural to grow up bi/multilingual as it is monolingual.

Most bilingual children will use sounds and words from both languages in the same utterances (mixing) or may switch languages for phrases or whole sentences (code-switching).

Two types of second language acquisition may occur in the early years of a child's life: *simultaneous acquisition* and *successive* or *sequential acquisition*. *Simultaneous acquisition* occurs when children are exposed to a second or third language from birth. *Successive acquisition*, on the other hand, occurs when children learn a second language after the first is already partially established (e.g. when a child starts schooling in a different language from the one used at home). In the case of *simultaneous* bilingual acquisition, the process is considered to be similar to first language acquisition. Research has shown that infant bilinguals tend to store their second language in the same part of the brain as the first language (Genesee *et al.*

1979). This confirms that second or multiple languages learnt from birth are all treated by the brain as if they were the first. However, in the second instance, second language acquisition seems to be influenced by a number of important factors, including timing/age, motivation, strategy, consistency, opportunity, personality and the the home/family environment (Tokuhama-Espinosa, 2001).

It is important at this stage to note some of the main milestones of second language development common amongst many young children:

- *The silent period.* Some children need time before they feel confident to use their second language, and there are no minimum or maximum time limits.
- *The code-switching stage.* Most bilingual children will, at some stage, use words from both languages in the same utterances (mixing) or switch languages for whole sentences (code-switching). Experts consider this an effective communication strategy and point out that bilingual children will stop doing this as their languages develop (Romaine, 1995). Other experts argue that language mixing and code-switching are natural features of adult bilingual speech also, and the specific context dictates whether it is appropriate.
- *The separation stage.* Most bilingual children tend to associate a language with a particular person or place. This helps them to separate the languages and start using them more systematically. Consistent language exposure and distinct language contexts will enhance language separation.
- *Dominance of one language over the other.* Many bilingual children, particularly when they start school, do not want to appear different from their

monolingual peers. Parents often report that the use of the host country language becomes more dominant and children answer their parents in the majority language. This reluctance to use the home language is affected by the attitudes shown to bilingualism by the community and the child's school.

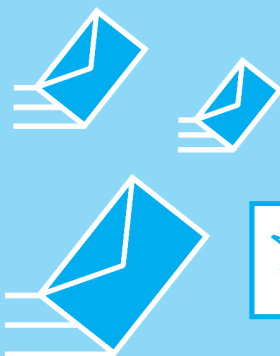
- *The stage of rapid shift* in balance when input in the environment changes. This may happen when bilingual children visit relatives at their or their parents' country of origin, or have a relative visiting over an extended period of time.

As complex as bilingualism and second language acquisition may seem, there is no doubt that bi/multilingual individuals today have an advantage. Research continues to confirm that, all other things being equal, children who learn a second language are more creative and better at solving complex problems than those who do not. Individuals who speak more than one language also have the ability to communicate with more people, read more literature, and benefit more from travel or work abroad. Knowing a second language also gives people a competitive advantage in the workforce. These are compelling reasons for parents and educators to encourage the development of a second (or third) language with young children.

Multilingual Education

Education systems may adopt the use of two or more languages for numerous reasons such as the linguistic heterogeneity of a country or a region, specific religious attitudes, or the desire to promote a national or community identity. In addition, innovative language education programs are often implemented to promote proficiency in international language(s) or wider communication. In many countries of the world where

Letters



Intercultural Encounters

We have just spent the holidays with our extended family in Denmark, according to whom my Danish is so good that they hardly notice me not being Danish. I have always considered this to be a compliment, until a couple of weeks ago. I had planned to visit relatives in another part of the country, and our hosts offered to look after my two youngest daughters. I said, in a very friendly tone:

“No, thank you. They are invited as well and I would like to take them with me.”

This, in German, would be a nice way of putting it. However, to the Danish ear it apparently sounds like this:

“Who do you think you are! Do you expect me to leave my children with *you?!?!*”

I was stunned by what followed and had no idea what they were talking about. It suddenly dawned on me that the problem might be ‘etiquette’. I explained that I had never spent more than four weeks at a time in the country. This was dismissed with the argument that my Danish was perfect and I would have been just as rude speaking German too. But knowing words does not mean knowing how to use them. I hope to spend more time in Denmark in the future so I can get to know the Danish mind also!

In this situation, the BFN (22:1) came. Both Alec's and Suzanne's entries helped me to see that the situation was not a personal issue but a cultural one, and that there are other people out there who face similar misunderstandings. Thank you!

Judith Sørensen, Germany

The Things They Say...



Jael (8, German, English and Danish) and I visit a 'Stiftsmuseum' (local museum) in a Danish town. 'Stift' in German means 'pencil'. After a while looking at some stone age pottery, Jael asks me: 'Mum, where are all the pencils???'

Judith Sorensen, Germany

multilingualism predominates, children are exposed to numerous languages as they move from their homes out to the surrounding communities and eventually through the formal education system. A comprehensive review of research on the use of first and second languages in education, carried out for the World Bank (Dutcher, 1994), examined three different types of countries:

1. Those with no (or few) mother tongue speakers of the language of wider communication (e.g. Haiti or Nigeria);
2. Those with some mother tongue speakers of the language of wider communications (e.g. Guatemala);
3. Those with many mother tongue speakers of the language of wider communication (e.g. Canada, New Zealand, United States).

This study drew several conclusions, including:

- Success in school depends upon the child's mastery of academic language, which is very different from the social language used at home (Cummins 1984).
- The development of academic language requires time, from four to seven years of formal instruction. (Klesmer, 1994; Thomas & Collier, 1997).
- Individuals develop cognitive skills and master content material faster when they are taught in a familiar language.
- Cognitive/academic language skills, once developed, transfer readily from one language to another (Hakuta, 1986).
- The best indicator of potential cognitive/academic language development in a second language is the level of cognitive/academic language proficiency in the first language.
- Children learn a second language in different ways depending upon their culture and their individual personality.

According to most research findings, the following common characteristics can be identified in those programs that provide students with multiple language proficiency and foster academic success:

- Development of the mother tongue is encouraged to promote cognitive development and second language learning.
- Parental and community support and involvement are essential.
- Teachers are able to use the language of instruction with a high level of proficiency, whether it is their first or second language.
- Teachers are well trained, have cultural competence and subject-matter knowledge, and continually upgrade their training.

Recurrent costs for innovative programmes are approximately the same as they are for traditional programmes, although there may be additional one-time start-up costs. Substantial cost benefits can typically be identified when improvements in years of schooling and enhanced earning potential for students with multiple language proficiency are taken into account.

Bilingual programmes that promote strong self-esteem and positive feelings about ethnic identity should be available for all children, be they bilingual or monolingual.

Although most of the educational research regarding bilingual learners tends to focus on the years of formal education, well organised early childhood bi-multilingual programs can make an enormous contribution towards preparing bilingual children for academic success and bilingual proficiency in the years to come. Early childhood bilingual programmes should not be seen as early assimilation programs which only aim at easing the transition of bilingual learners into mainstream monolingual programmes. Bilingual programmes that value linguistic and cultural diversity and promote strong self-esteem and positive feelings about ethnic identity should be available for all children, be they bilingual or monolingual.

In conclusion, although a considerable amount of studies exist on the topics of bi-multilingualism and bi-multilingual education, and although the majority of the world's population is bilingual or even multilingual, public awareness of the subject is still scarce. Many people – some of whom are in key professional positions – still follow their "natural instinct" when

expressing opinions or judgements, often misleading and misinforming parents of children growing up bilingually with the risk of causing adverse effects.

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Passing on a Heritage Language: Strategies for Success

Natalie Kramer



Natalie was born in the former Soviet Union and came to the US at the age of 16. Her son is a fluent speaker of three languages enrolled at a French school. Natalie has published several articles on educational topics.

Every semester, students congregate at my friend's office at a local university, asking to sign up for courses in their family languages. Many must start from scratch, Persian 101 let us say. Why, might you ask, would one need basic instruction in Persian if raised in a Persian family? Because families often do not take the right steps to ensure the successful coexistence of two languages in their children's lives. Many parents fear that it might be detrimental to their children to speak more than one language. The price their children pay, however, can be steep. Many feel a great sense of loss. Some try to learn the basics later but, unfortunately, the opportunity may have been missed: languages learned in a classroom are unlikely to ever feel native in the same way as childhood languages.

I have observed many families faced with the issues of passing their language on to the next generation. Many succeed, yet many others make equally concerted efforts and fail. I have also seen parents who make no efforts at all. From these observations, and from my own experience as a parent, I have formed a set of ideas about beneficial and not-so-beneficial practices.

What are the barriers to successful teaching of heritage languages? They are of two basic kinds: misconceptions and lack of know-how. The misconceptions are rooted in outdated beliefs that speaking more than one language is harmful: if we speak Arabic to our son, will he have problems learning English? The fact is: if a child speaks a foreign language at home and is exposed to the majority language at school, his proficiency in this language will be indistinguishable from his peers. Another fact: children successfully taught to read in the family language first, will often be better at reading the majority language than their monoliterate

counterparts, as is well demonstrated by academic research.¹

Sufficient exposure to each language and adequate teaching are crucial to success. People often ask me why my son needs lessons in Russian if he already speaks it fluently. I explain to them that the instruction is not in the spoken language, but rather in literacy skills. Sometimes I ask if these people would consider pulling their own children out of English at school; after all, they already speak English!

Many children do not end up speaking their family language, despite their parents' initial efforts. Why? Because children often offer resistance, and the family language becomes grounds for power struggles. Without appropriate support, the family language becomes progressively weaker.

The image of the parents in the child's mind should be that of speakers of the family language. If I address my son in a language other than Russian, he feels that something is amiss.

The key is to enable the child to speak the family language with ease from an early enough age and to maintain exposure and fluency as they get older. That way very little, if any, resistance is offered. Youngsters can feel pride in their skills in fact and may not mind flaunting them. In fifth grade my son was asked to the blackboard to demonstrate Cyrillic writing to the class and, as a result, he felt competent and empowered, a welcome boost for any child. The efforts to create and sustain fluency, however, must be consistent. Speaking the family language is not negotiable. I am sometimes asked if being so inflexible is not cruel. To my mind, what is cruel is depriving a child of his heritage, making him unable to speak to his own grandmother without a translator. If parental authority in this area is established, the rules are not difficult to enforce.

The parents themselves have to be disciplined: no switching to the majority language. The image of the parents in the child's mind should be that of speakers of the family language. If for some reason I address my son in a language other than Russian, he feels that something is amiss.

This is the kind of mindset that helps children to remain fluent. This doesn't mean that an occasional exchange can't take place in the majority language when around majority language speakers. Nor does it mean that the parents cannot correct their children's errors in the majority language: very often competent non-native speakers of a language are good teachers. However, parents should not get into the habit of speaking the majority language out of concern about errors in their children's language skills. Modeling the majority language should be left up to well-educated native speakers, with whom ample contact should be made available.

Some families withhold the majority language completely until the age of five or six. Personally, I am not in favour of such a measure. I feel that a child raised in a particular country has the right to form the same intimate bond with the majority language and culture (*Sesame Street* for example) as their peers. I do believe, however, that exposure to the family language should be at least slightly greater than to the majority language in preschool years. The child should be allowed to have friends who speak the majority language, watch some television, and be read to in the majority language. A part-time play group is ideal, and the child can be introduced to the majority language alphabet there. However, time devoted to activities in the family language should be greater in the early years to ensure initial fluency on which to build later. Otherwise, the majority language may begin to overpower the family language; clearly a recipe for disaster. If a child's exposure to the family language at home is not sufficient to enable them to begin speaking fluently, parents must act quickly. All other relatives to the rescue! Exposure must be increased, and if no relatives live in the area, finding a baby-sitter, a friend, or someone whose house the child can visit can prevent problems from developing. Many times aunt Masha will be delighted to come from the old country for a few months to work as a live-in caregiver.

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Reading and writing come next. Some experts believe that reading should not be taught simultaneously in two languages. However, I believe it can be done with many children. My son learned to read English and Russian at about the same time without any problems whatsoever. In fact, once he learned the principle of letter-sound correspondences in one language, applying it to the other language was very easy for him [please see *BFN 22:1 for more details on biliteracy* - ed]. However, if you want your child to be fluent *and* literate in your language, you better forget the meaning of “lazy”. If you can’t do the teaching yourself, hire a teacher or go the diaspora church or community center. However you do it, start early, certainly by the time the child is five or six.

Although teaching one’s own child is not for everybody, once the routines are established it can be pleasant and rewarding. We started teaching our son the Russian alphabet during bath time when he was three; we wrote letters on the bath tiles with markers. By age five, he could write most simple words. One note of caution if parents decide to hire a teacher: one or two lessons a week will not take place of a sustained exposure at home. I have seen parents select a teacher, provide transportation to class, and when it is over, greet their children in English! Whilst this type of arrangement may be better than nothing, it is hardly ideal. The primary source of the family language should be the family; lessons can only act as reinforcement. Also, if homework is assigned, parents need to see that it gets done and to provide help when needed. This demonstrates that the parents are serious about the task at hand. Once basic speaking, reading and writing have been mastered, consistency, practice and repetition are again the key. Regularly scheduled reading and language lessons should take place. They should take the same priority as regular school work. No excuses. Whenever possible, audio and video cassettes, reading and play groups should be made available to supplement formal instruction.

Our language is one of the most precious gifts we can offer our children. With effort, organization, and know-how, our majority language-speaking children can also be proud and literate speakers of their family languages. When asked to interpret something simple, a first-generation Chinese American should not have to admit that she “only eats Chinese”.

¹ Bialystock, E. ‘Effects of Bilingualism and Biliteracy on Children’s Emerging concepts of Print’ in *Developmental Psychology*, Vol. 33, No. 3.

Notes From the OPOL Family



Teething Problems - Fairy or Mouse?

Nina’s first tooth fell out tonight. She is, of course, pleased as punch and is eagerly awaiting her treasure from...who? Now exactly who is it that brings the money again? Here we have a small cultural dilemma, and one which will no doubt be familiar to BFN readers the world over.

In England you put your tooth under your pillow. There is a sweet little Tooth Fairy who flies into your room whilst you are asleep. She pops the tooth in her bag, flaps her wings gently and leaves a Pound coin, or more if you are lucky. She apparently looks something like Tinkerbell from Peter Pan, though no one has ever seen the Tooth Fairy. The only way you might be aware of her is the presence of a slight breeze when she leaves.

However, in France the tooth fairy is almost unheard of. In her place there is a mouse who creeps in when you are asleep and takes the tooth and leaves a Euro or two under the pillow. She doesn’t appear to have a bag for her nightly harvest though – perhaps she holds the finds in her teeth? This mouse is called La Petite Souris.

This was quite a cultural revelation to me when Marc, our firstborn, lost his first tooth. We were obviously very excited and telephoned both sets of grandparents to tell them the news. At midnight we tiptoed in and left some coins under his pillow. Two days later the post arrived and we found two charming little letters. One from ‘The Fairy’ with a cut out picture and money enclosed, and one from ‘The Mouse’, with a drawing and several Euros taped to the letter. Marc didn’t know what to believe! Did the Fairy go under his pillow or via the post? Who was the Mouse? How come he got three lots of money? Would it always be this good?

The incident resulted in so many tricky questions that we decided to set some rules for our indulgent grandparents. After all, there were a lot of teeth to lose and three sets of milk teeth to pay

for. We kindly asked the Mouse to stay in France for the time being and plumped for the English Fairy and her pillow tricks. But when a tooth falls out in France, as it did on one summer holiday, the Mouse comes and delivers the goods, in local currency of course.

But now we live in Malaysia and the Fairy, rather considerably I think, brings ringgits, and flies all the way from England on the back of the Malaysian Airlines flight.

‘Why?’ asks Marc, now doing advanced mathematics at school ‘I would prefer a pound then I could change it and get seven ringgits!’

‘Hmm’ I reply, noting he is getting too old for such trickery ‘Please don’t tell Nina that, she’s happy with her one ringgit coin!’

False Friends

School can be very confusing in your second language. French is full of faux amies or ‘false friends’, words that look or sound the same but mean different things. There are many mixed couples in our school where the mother speaks French as a second or third language. Since mothers often do the homework and school preparation there is sometimes miscommunication.

When the school requested ‘les baskets’ for the next day one mum brought in a lovely wicker basket only to find out that a basket is a sneaker! The word originally came from shoes worn for basket ball games. I have also heard people talk about ‘les tennis’ meaning sneakers too, not your tennis racquet!

After school one mother was told by the French teacher that she ‘Has OK today!’ She simply thought the teacher had rather odd grammar, it should have been ‘Was OK today’. she thought. On the way home she soon realised her daughter had hiccups, which is *le hoquet* in French, and the teacher had been trying to tell her!

Overhearing the French *mamas*’ talking about the ‘spectacle’ coming up, another mother tried to join in the conversation. She agreed how important eye tests were and when was the school having the children tested? The other mothers were rather bemused – they were talking about the end of term school show or ‘spectacle’.

Suzanne and Jacques are an English/French couple with three more-or-less bilingual children (Marc, 8, Nina, 6 and Gabriel, 2 years). They have lived as a family in Budapest, Cairo, Zurich, France and England and now live in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Marc and Nina attend the Lycee Francais there. They try to stick to the OPOL approach.

Biculturalism Without Bilingualism: Language and Cultural Identity

Trevor Watt



Trevor Watt grew up in a Finnish/English family in the UK. Despite efforts to encourage Finnish, Trevor and his sister grew up speaking English at home.. We asked Trevor to share his thoughts on the significance of language and culture to him.

Can you give a short description of your family background?

My father is British and my mother is Finnish. My elder sister and I were born in Zambia. Our parents met in Finland, married, moved to Zambia, then back to the UK. We grew up in the UK speaking mainly English.

Were there attempts to teach Finnish in the home as a child?

When my sister and I were young, there was no distinction made between the two languages. We would indiscriminately combine Finnish and English words – our parents always remember my sister announcing on the plane back from Zambia what she had “done” with “dirty *vaippa!*” [*vaippa* is Finnish for nappy]. There were also certain Finnish words that were always used in our house – for example meals were always announced with “*Syömään!*” [*come and eat!*]. I remember a feeling of revelation when I found out how dinner times were announced in friends’ houses. I had hardly realised that “*syömään!*” was a Finnish word. It was at this point that we realised that other children didn’t talk in this “Finnglish” way and my sister and I made it clear to our parents that we wanted to be considered English, like our friends. I think this is a common phenomenon in intercultural families where the children have not been brought up bilingually. The less dominant language is more easily suppressed once school begins and the children make contacts outside the family.

Attempts to teach Finnish were limited to using Finnish words for certain things. There was a time (I think I must have been maybe 10 – 12) that we were taken to the Finnish school in Bristol every second Saturday. At this age we were particularly

resistant. Learning the language was hard by then, we weren’t interested in cultivating our “different” background, and we resented the taking up of our weekends. However, we knew more Finnish than the few words used at home and, when we went to Finland, we managed to get by. Speaking Finnish in Finland was OK, we just didn’t want to do it in England where none of our friends did.

Do you regret not being bilingual?

Certainly. Jaana and I sometimes criticise our mother for not being more assertive.

I can bore friends silly talking about how beautiful the country is, yet I can’t help feeling almost a fraud. If I ever went there I would be as much at a loss as if we were visiting China.

She always says “you don’t know how difficult it was when you were so stubborn”, which is a fair answer. It has definitely hindered bonding with my mother’s culture. I still find it embarrassing having to ask our parents for a translation when relatives want to talk.

As I have got older and I’ve become more proud of our background, I’ve talked about taking friends to Finland. I can bore friends silly with talking about how beautiful the country is, yet I can’t help feeling a fraud. If I ever went there I would be as much at a loss as if we were visiting China. I think language is a major part of being able to “claim” any kind of heritage.

Do you consider yourself equally British and Finnish, or British with some Finnish heritage, or are such descriptions useless?

I consider myself equally British and Finnish. I don’t think such descriptions are useless, as I they have a political dimension; some people I have met of mixed heritage are proud of their background and see it as distancing themselves from what can be an unpleasant and suspicious British view of Europe.

The inevitable question: if England and Finland (!?) were in the final of the world cup, which side would you be on?

Finland, without question! My support for England is only marginally above indifference anyway. I had a great time watching Finland play England a few years

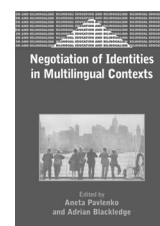
ago in a local pub. I wore a woolly hat my aunt had knitted for me with a Finnish flag on it. It was like a beacon attracting other Finns. Although, again, whilst amongst English friends I could stake what I felt to be a valid claim to be a Finland supporter, when these other *real* Finns came over, they realised my claim to being a Finn was somewhat flimsy. Being stuck between the two – speaking only English in a Finnish hat – somehow epitomised how I felt about my heritage: I felt real pride, yet couldn’t help also feeling a bit of a fake, like these home counties glory seekers who support Man Utd with no reason.

How much contact do you keep with Finland?

We used to go once a year. In recent years I have been once a year or 18 months. I would love to go on my own or with friends, but the language thing is an obstacle. Because we have a lot of family over there who I rarely see, I would always feel obliged to visit. This is difficult without a translator, so visits are usually timed for when my parents are over there.

NEGOTIATION OF IDENTITIES IN MULTILINGUAL CONTEXTS

Edited by
Aneta Pavlenko (*Temple University*) and
Adrian Blackledge
(*University of Birmingham*)



The volume highlights the role of language ideologies in the process of negotiation of identities and shows that in different historical and social contexts different identities may be negotiable or non-negotiable. The chapters address various ways in which individuals may be positioned or position themselves in a variety of contexts. In asking questions about social justice, about who has access to symbolic and material resources, about who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’, the authors take account not only of localised linguistic behaviours, attitudes and beliefs; they also locate them in wider social contexts which include class, race, ethnicity, generation, gender and sexuality.

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How about the culture? Do you watch Finnish movies or listen to Finnish music?

Not really. Sibelius occasionally. I remember once, while boring friends with tales of Finland, I played Sibelius' 7th symphony when they asked what Finland in the winter was like – they said it created a real picture of the place.

What is the most important thing you have gained from your background?

This is difficult to answer. An interest in other cultures certainly, and perhaps an improved awareness of what it means to be a foreigner in this country. I've never really thought about this before, but I have a real interest in national characteristics. Finns are so utterly different from British people and this may be the background to that interest.

Personally speaking, from a political point of view, I have a strong interest in the issues of immigration and Europe in general. I have had to learn two other languages and have found these fairly easy to learn – maybe this is due to more than one language being heard constantly when I was very young. Having said that, I haven't applied this to Finnish yet, but one day I'll get round to learning again.

What sticks in your mind as your favourite and least things about both English and Finnish culture/society?

People talk a lot about British character and values, and I have always thought there is no such thing. In such a mixed society it's hard to pinpoint anything like that, but I think one thing I really love about Finns is that this doesn't seem like such a futile exercise. It's a much more homogeneous country and that makes it and its people fascinating to watch and experience. The Finnish "character" is something I find intriguing, because (I think) the stereotype of Finns as rather depressed conversation-less northerners is at the same time both true and utterly wrong.

I'm always really happy that Finland is often referred to in the news when comparisons are made regarding European living/welfare/educational standards. This may be a real copout, but I often find myself wishing that Britain (or rather British people) could be a bit more like Finns in the way things are organised and in their sense of priorities – I think that would make this a much happier country. However, like a typical English tourist, I also often wonder why things can't be as easy as they are over here. I might, for example, be trying to negotiate a way around Finnish bureaucracy and will pretend to myself that it's the way they do things that's wrong, rather than my inability to understand a word of it.



Bilingualism and Autism

My son has just turned 3. He was exposed to both English and Gaelic (Scottish language) from birth. However, as almost all of the adults he comes in contact with only speak English he has had much more exposure to this. He does attend a Gaelic parent and toddler group twice a week.

He seemed to be doing well in understanding both languages at 14

Bilingual upbringing should not affect outcome for a child with learning or communication difficulties. In this case, I would first advise being quite clear that the child has the diagnosis of autism (Domhnall mentions regression/plateauing of social and behaviour aspects, but does not give details). Children with autism can not work out what communication is all about and therefore only use language in certain restricted ways (if at all). They like things to be predictable, so while the language medium used for communication in any situation should not matter, it is important to be consistent (i.e. not start using English in a situation where Gaelic is nearly always used). A child with autism is unlikely to learn through the medium of language, so the cognitive benefits from being bilingual are not likely to occur – but the other social benefits will.

The above may not necessarily apply if the child turns out to have a diagnosis different from autism. Three years is quite young for a definite diagnosis, although indications of autistic behaviour are usually noted by then. I am assuming that other possibilities, such as deafness, have been excluded.

One thing to bear in mind will be the language medium for any specialist help the child may get (i.e. speech/language therapy; support from an assistant in school, etc). In bilingual communities such as North Wales and parts of Scotland, awareness and acceptance/promotion of bilingualism is usually good among professionals – however they may not be

months, for instance when you asked him "where are your shoes?" in English or in Gaelic he would physically go and get his shoes. He had around 5-10 words which he would use in context. However, as with his social and behaviour side, we have found that his language has plateaued/ regressed. He has around five English words that he will use in context but prefers physical communication. He still understands some words in Gaelic i.e. for "milk" etc.

As he is starting nursery for two years then will go on to Primary School (5 years) we still have a choice of educating him in English or in Gaelic (with English as a second language). My question is really this: research seems to point to beneficial cognitive development for "normal" children educated in two languages (in addition to the cultural benefits), in comparison to only one.

However, in the case of autism would exposure to two languages improve his cognitive development or take valuable time and resources away from getting him to speak one language well?

My wife only speaks a few words of Gaelic and I am not a fluent speaker but try hard.

**Domhnall Camshron,
Ayrshire, Scotland**

able to help him optimally if asked to do this in a language they are not fluent in.

**Carolyn Letts,
University of Newcastle, UK**

Domhnall's response:

The advice I have received from most people connected with bilingualism is that there should be no reason for the autistic not to grow up in a bilingual environment, although each child has different needs. A specialist in Autism has advised us in our case to only use one language for the first four years (to age 6/7 years) then introduce the second language at that point. My son is a regressive autistic with perhaps only 1-3 English words (sounds) at the moment (3.5 years old), less than at 2 years old. He certainly did understand Gaelic (the second language at 18 months). Another angle is that because of the lack of verbal language there is no way of telling how much language he is picking up or understands. In light of this some say "just go for it" as autistic's IQs are usually underestimated.

We are requesting ABA [Applied Behavioral Analysis] and PECS [Picture Exchange Communication Systems] as an approach with our son to learn language, however, these will almost always be done in English as getting bilingual (Gaelic) special needs staff is impossible. This area seems to be really under researched.

Domhnall Camshron

The editor, with the help of the International Editorial Board, is happy to answer any queries you may have on bilingualism /biculturalism. We reserve the right to edit any letters published.

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Glossary

Accent: A persons pronunciation, which may reveal, for example, which region, country or social class they come from.

Acculturation: The process by which an individual or a group adapt to a new culture.

Active Vocabulary: This refers to the actual number of words that people use, as opposed to a passive vocabulary which is words they understand. Native language speakers often have a vocabulary of between 30,000 and 50,000 words. Their passive vocabulary may extend to 100,000 words or more. In foreign language learning, reasonable proficiency is said to be achieved when someone attains an active vocabulary of between 3000 and 5000 words, with a passive vocabulary of up to 10,000 words.

Acquisition Planning: Part of formal language planning where interventions are made to encourage families to pass on their minority language, and schools to produce more minority language speakers.

Anomie: A feeling of disorientation and rootlessness, for example in in-migrant groups.