

Myths about bilingualism

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Losing a language is akin to losing a past and future life story

by Inge Gaudin

Although bilingualism is a way of life for migrants' children in Australia and New Zealand, a child's English language and literacy skills often become the measure of how successfully they have adapted to their new country. Parents naturally want their children to perform just as well as their monolingual classmates and are often faced with the dilemma of whether they should raise their child bilingually, or to speak English only.

Some children learn to speak two languages simultaneously because one parent talks to them in English, while the other communicates in their first language. Other children learn their first language at home and English as a second language when they start day care or kindergarten.

During the process of settling into their new country, migrants may consider it wise to initially place little emphasis on their first language. They may encourage their children to speak English as much as possible, even when they are at home or with their own cultural group. Subsequently the child's comprehension of their first language diminishes and only a few phrases such as 'thank you' or 'yummy' are retained. When a child understands a language well but cannot speak it fluently, it is referred to as passive language skills. Bilingual parents often assume that their English-speaking child understands everything they say in their first language. Restricted use of a language can affect a child's comprehension of that language. It can come as a shock to parents to realise that their child lacks understanding of their first language.

In addition, if children get little practice speaking their first language, they can become self-conscious about their pronunciation and may refrain from speaking it at all. Some patterns of how young children lose their first language are evident. As adults, these children may later

yearn to speak the language of their youth and go to great lengths to relearn it. They will also be less likely to teach their own children to speak it fluently one day. It begs the question, how long will this first language survive in Australia and New Zealand?

A family's home language can therefore gradually shift to English, although the parents never intended for it to happen. If you wish to retain your first language as your home language, a rule should be made from the outset: 'At home, we speak OUR language'. Providing definitions and extra chances to repeat new words stimulate vocabulary and comprehension development. Even though it takes effort and patience to preserve a mother tongue and all that it represents, parents of all nationalities are encouraged to guard their first language as a precious possession.

Sometimes children become monolingual English speakers with passive language skills in their first language due to the following myths about bilingualism:

If I only speak my child's second language (e.g. English) at home, my child will do better at school.

Research actually shows that it is better for children to become more fluent in their first language as this gives them a solid foundation upon which to learn a second language. If they produce grammatical errors in their first language, how will they know how to formulate sentences in their second language?

Bilingualism can place my child at a disadvantage compared with their peers.

Although bilingual speakers can take a while to catch up with native speakers, research shows that one of the benefits of being bilingual is that the child has a more sophisticated understanding of how language works. However, until the age of seven or eight, it is normal for bilingual children to make more tense errors than their monolingual English counterparts.

A bilingual child can only become truly fluent in one language.

Research shows that with adequate support, a bilingual child can learn to speak two languages at the same level of proficiency as a monolingual speaker.

I cannot influence whether my child will be bilingual or not. It is their choice and depends on their skills and how comfortable they are speaking the language. I cannot force them to speak a specific language.

The parents' attitude about bilingualism actually determines whether the child stays bilingual or not. If the parents value the second language more and speak it most of the time, they inadvertently teach their children that it is acceptable not to speak their first language.

It is too late for my child to start speaking their first language again after they have stopped speaking it.

It is never too late to learn a language to a point of fluency, especially if you have a background in it already. Language skills can help you to 'survive' in situations. If you must speak it to meet your needs, your proficiency increases dramatically.

If my child has a diagnosed problem learning their first language, they will not be able to learn a second one.

This hypothesis is not supported by research.

If you are worried that your child has a problem learning their first or second language, an assessment by a speech pathologist can be arranged through a government clinic or private practice. Speech pathologists take the child's exposure to both languages into account when evaluating a bilingual child and for the development of therapy programs.

It is important to distinguish between bilingualism and language delays or disorders. Delays or disorders can be the result of a family history of such difficulties, birth events or prolonged ear infections. These difficulties are characterised by problems with processing, storing or retrieving sounds, words or sentences.

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