How to Best Support Multilingual Families at Home and in School?


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It is a truism that all parents want the best for their children: making good decisions about children’s health and safety, habits, and educational choices is part of the ongoing monitoring that is simply on every parent’s job list. For many families, another item on the list is language choice: How do we manage multiple languages in the home? Will my child suffer from delayed language or cognitive development if we speak a different language than the one used in the community? Does academic success depend on mastering only the language used in school? What happens to my child if two languages are intermixed in the home, even within the same conversation? These are difficult questions and parents rightly turn to experts to guide their decisions. *Children’s Multilingual Development and Education* by Bailey and Osipova is one such contribution to this discussion.

As a country built through immigration, the United States has always been characterized by linguistic, cultural, ethnic, and religious differences, but until recently the pressure to assimilate concealed the visibility and endurance of those minority communities. More recently, however, the combination of changing demographics, such as an increase in the population of Spanish-speaking Americans, and shifting attitudes towards heritage languages, has made the issues around diversity more salient. It is in this context that there has been a surge in public interest in topics associated with bilingualism and raising bilingual children, as reflected in increased number of books, websites, research, media, and educational options such as immersion programs. Interest in learning a second language has also increased due to the realization of many parents that we work in a global economy, and knowledge of additional languages is seen as a valuable asset by many employers. The purpose of the book by Bailey and Osipova is to speak directly to parents and teachers who are responsible for multilingual children and support some of the challenges they will encounter by providing information and opening a conversation about the topic.

Language is inherently political. The way societies organize language use is incredibly complex
because the decisions penetrate all the institutions: administrative (what languages will be available to receive government services), educational (what languages will be acceptable for instruction both as a medium and as a foreign language), public (what languages will be displayed in public and community spaces, including private businesses), and communicative (what languages will be used in the news and other media), and so on. But perhaps the most consequential of the decisions around diversity are the personal ones: what language or languages will we speak to our children, use in our family, and expose our children to in school? However, parents do not make these choices in a social vacuum and understanding that larger context matters a great deal. It is important to be clear about that context.

The difference between language decisions taken at the societal level and those taken by individuals reveals a central dichotomy that is frequently blurred. Societal bilingualism describes a situation in which there is official acknowledgement of more than one community language, often with those languages represented in the national parliament. Individual bilingualism is a statement about the language proficiency of an individual person. Thus, Canada, Switzerland, Belgium, Luxembourg, and India are officially multilingual countries in which many of the citizens are monolingual. This reality needs to better constrain the musings by the authors regarding whether it is the United States or Europe that is more “monolingual”, a question that is inherently misleading, or at the least, ambiguous. In confusing these definitions of “bilingual”, the authors attempt to dispute statements such as “America is a monolingual nation” and “Americans are monolingual”. These are different claims and they have different consequences for our understanding of the language context. For example, the statement “Canada is a bilingual nation” is true, but “Canadians are bilingual” may be false. For that reason, the central assertion, “At the heart of the book lies a potent myth – a false belief that the United States is a monolingual, English-only speaking nation...” (p. 12) is in fact a true belief. The English-only monolingual status of English in the United States is decreed by policy enshrined in the law of 32 states as “Official English” or “English Only” acts, whether or not citizens are able to speak multiple languages.
These laws influence all aspects of life in those states. The authors cite statistics supporting the multilingual competence of Americans, but those statistics speak to individual bilingualism and not societal bilingualism. Many of the problems that are addressed in this book are a direct result of the fact that the United States is, in fact, a monolingual nation. These distinctions are important because they provide the context in which children grow and families function and ultimately impact the language learning decisions made by parents for their children and educators in the design of curricula. The central irony for the United States is that it is a monolingual nation inhabited by bilinguals, with approximately 20% of the population considered to be bilingual (Grosjean & Li, 2012). This disconnect is stressful and fuels the hunger for parents to seek guidance in decision-making, find sources of social and emotional support, and understand the science that addresses these questions.

The book by Bailey and Osipova promises just that. The main section reports the results of a qualitative study conducted by the authors to understand the experience of multilingualism and children’s development in the U.S. from a “first-person” perspective. The authors interviewed 26 parents, from 23 different families, who are raising multilingual children and 13 educators who have dealt with multilingual children in their classrooms in a variety of language programs. All these participants were interviewed in an extensive session probing their personal experiences and asking about their beliefs about bilingualism and strategies for addressing various circumstances that inevitably arise. In an interesting turn, the two groups were also asked about their advice for the other, that is, what would parents say to teachers and vice versa.

A note of caution is necessary at this point. For research results to be meaningful, one must assume that its outcomes can be generalized to a larger population than the sample from which they were obtained. To assure such generalizability, studies either evaluate a large sample that includes the population diversity that the study aims to address in order to maximize the range of applicability of the results, or confine the study to a smaller sample that has been selected to be similar on relevant
dimensions in order to control for variability and maximize the reliability and accuracy of the results, even though they will apply to a more narrowly-defined group. The study reported in this book falls somewhere between the two, and the effect is to make the results more anecdotal than scientific. The study is based on a relatively small number of family members and educators who cover a wide range of characteristics, such as children’s ages, context of children’s English acquisition, types of disabilities, and so on, limiting generalizability. To that end, the main contribution of the study is to provide a framework for drawing out key research questions of how to sustain multilingualism in home and school contexts. More concrete conclusions, however, will require more detailed research.

The authors do acknowledge that family decisions are made in the context of a society that may or may not support those choices, as explained above in the distinction between societal and individual bilingualism. It is an important reality for these families that impacts the experience of children both at home and at school, and it is the authors’ goal to at least bridge one of those gaps by bringing together parents and teachers. In that sense, they open the possibility for dialogue between these sectors and expose parents to information from other families in the same situation that might help decrease the isolation and frustration experienced by many of these families. This is a valuable contribution, and the extensive quotes from the survey that are included in the book will certainly resonate with parents.

One theme that emerges throughout the discussion is the interesting idea of investment. Parents described their willingness to take on the financial, emotional, and immense time investments, and may have even sacrificed their own learning of English to cultivate successful learning of non-English languages in their children. Correspondingly, many of the educators spoke of the need for increased parental involvement, another type of investment, and promoted the practice of parents learning the second-language along with the child. This level of investment is contrary to the myth that young children experience “effortless multilingualism” and instead shows the need for an appropriate support system for language learning to be successful.
The book is also effective in raising questions that need to be explicitly addressed for language learning to be successful. For example, in the educational context, a challenging aspect of two-way immersion programs that involve instructing both English-dominant children and non-English dominant children in both languages with the idea that each group will aid the other in learning their language, is how to determine the level of time and content dedicated to each language. Similarly, the authors present practical research that rules out the popular belief that parents should invest in the one-parent-one-language method in the home in which each parent makes a commitment to speak to the child using only one of the two home languages. This conclusion is consistent with other evidence that fails to support the need for that strategy (De Houwer, 2007; King & Fogle, 2006; Yamamoto, 2001). Moreover, parents who do claim to follow the single language rule have been shown in observational studies to engage in continual language mixing by both parents (De Houwer, 1995). These are important questions and the results and insights will be helpful to those who struggle with these decisions.

In addition, parents and educators will benefit from the sections that discredit such popular myths as “children with disabilities are unable to learn multiple languages” and “if children do not focus on learning English they will not succeed” academically. In both cases, the common practice is to prioritize English learning. There are, in fact, positive aspects of dual-language learning for children with disabilities and in general, multilingualism has been shown to be more likely associated with positive rather than negative academic outcomes. It is also discussed repeatedly that encouraging first-language knowledge can contribute to successful learning of a second language, a conclusion based on research that should be reassuring to parents. In summary, within this body of research are useful tools for parents to help guide their investment in their child’s language learning environment.

This is all helpful for parents, but the problem is that the book also attempts to do something else at the same time. Intertwined with the survey results from the interviews and practical advice for parents and teachers is a commentary on the research that has investigated some of the issues
discussed in these consultations. In the past 50 years there has been a dramatic increase in the amount of research addressing these issues, including studies of second-language acquisition, linguistic consequences of bilingualism, academic outcomes in various types of bilingual programs, the cognitive consequences of bilingualism, among others. At this point, these research areas have accumulated substantial amounts of knowledge about the processes involved in bilingual language acquisition and use and its impact on children’s development. The research includes behavioral studies of children’s performance and neuroimaging studies of the brain adaptations to bilingualism. The research is theoretically-driven, and those theories have evolved as new empirical information is accumulated. The primary conclusion from this body of work is the need to acknowledge the complexity of the problem and the myriad factors that must be considered to understand the relation between multilingualism and children’s development. For example, in the first year of life, the attention system of infants being raised in monolingual or bilingual environments develops differently, with better attention control in bilingually-raised infants (Comishen, Bialystok, & Adler, in press). In childhood, bilingual children outperform monolinguals on a wide range of tasks that require resolving conflict through controlled attention (review in Barac, Bialystok, Castro, & Sanchez, 2014). Details of the context (Green & Abutalebi, 2013) and descriptions of the child’s environment on such features as socioeconomic status (Hartanto, Toh, & Yang, 2018) all need to be considered in interpreting the results. Unfortunately, none of that complexity and none of the emerging explanations are reflected in the description of that research that is provided in this book.

Beyond the general problem of currency, three examples illustrate more specific problems in how the scholarly research is presented. The first is that the authors fail to distinguish between evidence that reflects opinions and evidence that is the outcome of empirical research. Opinions matter and may be especially relevant for parents reading this book who want to check their own views against those of other people, but they have a different epistemological status than that of research evidence. For
example, the questions on such matters as whether language acquisition is delayed in bilingual children, the inevitably of an accent in a second language, and the relative ease or difficulty of language learning for children, are essentially resolved in this book by personal opinion rather than by a critical evaluation of the research which, in some cases, contradicts those opinions. Yet, both types of evidence are presented together, often in the same paragraphs, with no evaluation of their authority. The authors eventually mention that parents are not always the most accurate sources for judging their child’s language proficiency, in particular for the second language, yet that caution is unheeded in the majority of the book.

A second example of the unreliability of the presentation of research is in the use of outdated and sometimes discredited concepts from the field of second-language acquisition. These include such notions as language aptitude and additive bilingualism, terms that have no precise definitions and little explanatory value. The authors also accept the idea of a critical period for second-language learning that ends at around puberty, a view that is not only highly controversial and discredited through much evidence, including recent studies, but is also incompatible with their preferred theoretical framework based on a “social interactionist account of language learning”. Although there are undoubtedly critical periods in the establishment of individual basic processing abilities for the elements of language, especially a first language, there is simply no persuasive evidence that a nativist-inspired critical period imposes a cutoff for second-language acquisition and that the cutoff is around puberty.

Finally, the authors dismiss the research investigating the cognitive effects of bilingualism by calling it the “contested impact of bilingualism”. Surely, one of the main questions that parents have about their multilingual children is whether this language experience will have consequences for their cognitive ability and development. There is a lot of research on this question, and although not all studies reveal the same positive outcomes, the cognitive effects are prevalent, extensive, and significant (reviews in Bialystok, 2015, 2017). Parents deserve a more even-handed description of that complex
body of literature than a simple derogatory label. The ongoing research that is uncovering the lifelong impact of bilingualism on cognitive ability and brain structure is arguably the most important development in bilingualism in the past 50 years. If the authors are unable to present a fair and accurate account of that literature, they should at least acknowledge the importance of the question and point readers to other sources that can.

We applaud all efforts to support parents in the challenges they will inevitably face as they raise multilingual children in a deeply monolingual society. We also agree that the opportunity to hear directly from other parents who have dealt with similar issues can be helpful. The report of the survey of parents and teachers presented in this book opens a conversation that can help connect parents to the ideas of others dealing with the same daily challenges. However, research is not the same as an exchange of ideas. Research by definition is structured and rigorous, and when it is applied to questions as complex as children’s multilingual language development, it necessarily produces outcomes that are nuanced and require careful evaluation. Ultimately, parents need both types of information – the conversation provides support and the scientific research provides the evidence. Providing one type of information does not have to diminish the other. It is probably unrealistic for a single book to achieve both, but minimally a more realistic set of goals should be acknowledged. Ultimately, the best support comes from the best available information, and readers will need to look elsewhere to obtain a complete picture of this body of research.
References


