What are the most important factors in raising a bilingual child?

Raising a child is not an easy task, raising a bilingual child is a more challenging task. It is an important decision both for the parents and the child, as this decision would affect the family members for the rest of their lives. Parents play a significant role in the early development of a child's language acquisition in both languages. There are several key factors that parents should pay attention to once they set up their minds on cultivating their children to be bilinguals.

An agreement within the whole family must be reached. This agreement is a common view among family members that being bilingual is beneficial and there would be no subsequent objections, especially from grandparents. A discussion concerning this issue is always helpful before the child is born (Baker, 2014). Besides, for a child who is born in a bilingual family, those who babysit or take main care of the child would have a huge influence on the initial language development of the child. If parents have decided to adopt the OPOL method, they still have to decide which language they will use between them and with the rest of the family members, including grandparents. It would not be beneficial for the language development of the child if the different language inputs are uncertain and constantly shifting.

A balance in two languages must be guaranteed. This balance means not only an equal sufficient exposure of both languages, but input and output of that in the family and community in the long term as well. A child who is able to practice the majority language in the community or at school should have more opportunities to exercise the minority language at home with parents who speak it. It is easier for single parents to distribute the exposure in each language proportion for the child inside and outside the family. However, parents who speak different languages and decide to take the OPOL method ought to notice the amount of time that each of them spends with the child. "If the father is away from the home for long periods and he is the source of minority language experience for the child, uneven growth in language may occur."(Baker, 2014, p.20) Parents also need to notice the balance shift when grandparents or other family relatives arrive.

An appropriate environment for developing languages must be built. A child's language development is like a flower, parents should offer adequate sunshine and water for it to blossom (Baker, 2014). Every family member must ensure that the child holds a positive attitude towards being bilingual, which means to develop two languages in a friendly and comfortable process without too many external pressures (Baker, 2004). For parents that speak different languages and adopt the OPOL method, instead of operating a language competition by pouring different inputs to the child, they should cooperate to construct a relatively relaxing environment for the child to obtain the message that speaking two languages is a natural and comfortable behaviour. (Baker, 2014) Developing the child's

interest and motivation as well as joining bilingual language groups and associations which focus on promoting the minority language are adoptable approaches. Parents are often worried about the phenomenon that their bilingual children fall behind on language acquisition than monolingual children. In fact, it is completely normal due to vocabulary limitations in the beginning, eventually, the child would catch up with peers and achieve the same fluency in two languages as the monolingual children do in one language. (Baker, 2014) Therefore, an ease mind for the development of a child's language development process must be set by the parents.

Baker's suggestions match my experience as a teacher. In China, Chinese is the majority language and English would be the minority language. Children learn Chinese at home and school, so few parents would consider enrolling their children in Chinese classes unless the child suffers from the language barrier. At this point, learning Chinese is to survive. However, considering English as the most important minority language in China and would be beneficial for future career and academic development, it is not strange to see children learning English outside school in private institutions from age 3 to 15. It is a sign that parents are trying to reach the balance in two languages, though most of them could not speak English themselves. If one of the parents can speak English, he/she would practice English with the child in daily conversation, which explains why children of English teachers usually have better performances in English.

Report

Key instructions in raising bilingual children.

Now, with the further promotion of economic globalization and the rapid development of language education. More and more parents and even the government are advocating and implementing bilingual education. Especially for second-generation immigrants, acquiring bilingualism is almost a necessary measure. This article attempts to explore the key factors which will affect the process and effectiveness of children's bilingual acquisition in their growth. From the parents' perspective, there are three main significant factors in raising a bilingual child: parents' knowledge about bilingualism, children's motivation and interest; and children's language acquisition environment.

Parents' knowledge about bilingualism – external psychological influences

In children's growth, parents play a significant role in their bilingual development. Parents' attitudes towards bilingualism not only directly affects children's initial impression of it, but to some extent affects how much efforts this family would put to raise bilingual children as well.

The first and the most important thing parents should realize is that being bilingual doesn't equal being monolingual in two languages. That is to say, children who can speak two languages fluently doesn't mean they speak each language as good as those who speak only one language (Baker, 2014). Also, children exposed to two languages since childhood often develop their two languages relatively slower than monolinguals, because children "pick up" a language rather than 'learn' a language, this means they have to manage more input information and make comparisons in two languages to make the right choices for the output process like speaking and writing (Grosjean, 2009). These two facts deliver the message that parents should not frustrate when their bilingual children's language performances are not satisfying or correspondingly weaker than their peers (Lee et.al., 2015). If the parents are eager for success, children would feel this invisible pressure, leading them to be more inclined to the language used by the monolinguals whom they come into contact with.

Second, do parents know the benefits of being bilingual? No doubt being bilingual offers more job opportunities in the future and enhance children's competitiveness in academic and job markets (Baker,2014). Various researches have indicated that bilingual children are more likely to graduate from high school compared with monolinguals (Lee et.al., 2015). Emotionally, bilingual children are more friendly and open to different cultures and are more engaged in conversations with strangers (Lee et.al,.2015). Speaking two languages also promote children's abilities in multitasking, problem-solving, especially making decisions in multiple choices (Thordardottir, 2011). There are also evidences that being bilingual exercises the brain and would keep mental health longer (Lee et.al., 2015). To be short, being bilingual means better career opportunities, higher potential in conducting cultural researches, smoother methods in handling social connection etc.(Muller, 2020)

Third, are parents ready to raise a bilingual child? Every parent knows the advantages of being bilingual, which in turn makes parents turn blind or underestimate the specific disadvantages of bilingualism, such as the possibilities of both languages' incompetence, conflicts in communication especially in correcting expressions, marriage disorder, children's identities, and pressures from friends and family (Baker 2014). The decision of raising a bilingual child should be made after rigorous considerations and appraisal of its pros and cons. Often parents confidently decide to train their children to be bilinguals, but have to give up after experiencing difficulties and setbacks. It is an unfavourable influence on children's development of both language and self-esteem. Previous researches have suggested that most parents were ambiguous about their initial intentions in raising bilingual kids. Only a few of them were able to explain that they wanted their children to be bilingual due to the preservation of their minority languages, a heritage of their original culture, or to strengthen the family ties (Lee et.al,.2015). When asked about what they had done to practice their ideas, few parents admitted that they had studied or tried to obtain knowledge on improving bilingualism, a small amount of them convinced that language practice among family members was enough (Henelin & Williams, 2013). Apparently, most parents are following the trend rather than pondering over this issue.

Children's motivations and interests – internal powers

Language is about communication and delivering messages. The process of learning a language requires a lot of practice. However, parents should avoid mechanized speaking with children for it would hinder children's language development. Keeping children interested and motivated in learning languages has far more positive impacts than short term goals because children's motivation affects the speed of their language acquisition (Baker, 2014). Children's interest in language doesn't equivalent to their language abilities or aptitudes (Baker, 2014). Children's interests can be developed by parents. If a child is interested in reading, this child can obtain enough language input, parents would face the challenge of developing his/her interest in output, like speaking. For example, after finish reading a short story, a parent can ask the child to retell the story in another language, or humbly asking for a storytelling from the child. In a research conducted in the USA, a bilingual mother pretended to be an English monolingual and asked her daughter to "teach" her corresponding Spanish words which they both knew in English. She aimed to cultivate her daughter's interest by putting her in an "adult" position and the result turned to be very fruitful. Her daughter outweighed other bilingual peers in Spanish speaking (Lee et.al., 2015). Motivation is the derivate of interest and can be achieved from parents' supports and encouragements. While children's language usage frequency and order of acquisition are closely related to the language's input frequency, their language performances are not (Babatsouli & Nicoladis, 2019). That is to say, after obtaining enough language input, children are more willing to use this language, but their expression might not be accurate. It is a good signal that children are using languages rather than keeping silence. Parents better avoid correcting their mistakes all the time. Managing to engage children in more conversations is a preferred method to enhance their motivations. By identifying children's bilingual identities, they are more likely to express themselves than monolingual children (Cummins, 2012). When they are encouraged, they are more eager to learn and accept various channels of input and emerge more output, which forms a virtuous cycle in language acquisition in a long run.

Language acquisition environment – an indispensable boost

Researches have proved that children can distinguish languages in the late pregnancy stage. As "catch and use" is the progress of functioning a language for children (Baker, 2014). Parents really should start making preparations as soon as the child is born. The languages that surround the languages which ought to be achieved are of great importance (Baker, 2014).

Enough exposure to both languages is the first step to build an environment that stimulates bilingual development. It is natural to find imbalanced exposure in two languages because the majority language is being spoken in public places (Baker, 2014). Parents sometimes worry too much about the uneven growth in two languages, it is absolutely unnecessary because each language grows in its own path and

neither would be affected if one of them is under intensive training (Pham, Ebert and Kohnert, 2015). However, too much imbalance in two languages would result in failures in bilingual development and children's bilingual cognition as well as their bicultural identities (Bitetti & Hammer, 2016). The most noticeable phenomenon of insufficient exposure to the minority language is that children feel ashamed and abject when they speak it with monolingual children who speak the majority language (Lee et.al., 2015). Some parents encourage children to watch documentaries and TV programmes for the sake of their children's interests. This approach fails to see that this is only an input process and most languages spoken on TV are majority languages (Baker, 2014). What should parents do then? Parents who speak different languages and adopt the OPOL approach need to show children that each language is equal within the family by speaking the minority languages between parents themselves (Kaushanskaya & Crespo, 2019). Besides, after children obtaining sufficient language inputs, it is executable for parents to revisit the materials with children in both languages to achieve feedbacks and exercise their translanguaging abilities (Velasco & Garcia, 2014). In another word, children's input should come from interactions with people. In addition, associating with other families who speak both the majority and minority languages would also enhance children's vocabulary and communication skills (Lee et.al., 2015). In all, from the parents' point of view, the most effective way to enlarge minority language exposures in order to achieve bilingual balance is to interact with children as much as possible, such as using the minority language to play family games and read together.

Starting bilingualism early is also a method appreciated by scholars and parents. Much value has been seen in bilingual development earlier rather than later (Baker, 2014). Comparing with children who start bilingual relatively late, those who start young tend to have better pronunciation, even though both groups show few diversities in vocabulary capacity and grammar acquisition (Thordardottir, 2011). The benefit of starting young is to avoid too much influence from the majority language when bilingual education starts in the family. Children grow at home for the first several years, most children would not enrol in kindergarten before the age of 4, which means that most children would not face the pouring of majority languages before age 4. That offers parents a golden buffering time to balance the exposure of two languages within the family without too many interferences from the community. This controllable environment benefits both the children and their parents.

Be patient, tolerant and attentive to children's language development. Grammar acquisition comes after pronunciation, it is normal for children to make mistakes or occasionally mix two languages. Researches have proved that to endlessly correct children's language mistakes would put a negative effect on their language development. Explaining is a better substitution for correcting. Through explanation, parents extend the language meaning to a degree and build a stronger communicative bond with children at the same time (Baker, 2014). Provisional language mixing is like code-switching, it is children's attempts to add accuracies to their expressions. For parents, occasionally language mixing is necessary for explanation and interactions. It is beneficial for children's vocabulary and will promote

their language outputs in both languages in the future because this type of code-switching (aka. language transfer) enables them to discover more connections between two languages (Kaushanskaya & Crespo, 2019). By doing this, parents also tell the children in action that developing two languages together is a natural thing, offering a nicer and relaxing environment for children to practice their languages. Besides, many regions are hostile towards minority languages. Having faced this dilemma, establishing a peaceful environment at home or in the community where minority language could be utilized is of greater significance.

To summarize, parents have more on their shoulders when raising bilingual children. Many parents feel that it is the government and the school's responsibility to educate children to be bilingual by arranging minority language into compulsory courses (Lee et.al., 2015). Apparently, this is unrealistic. When raising children to be bilingual, parents have to be prepared mentally and physically.

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