What Are the Most Important Factors in Raising a Bilingual Child?

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With the development of globalization, we, all human beings, have a tighter connection with each other with a shared future. To be bilingual or even multi-lingual becomes a popular phenomenon all over the world, especially in this 21st century.

According to Colin Baker (2001: 1), First, "... we should make an initial distinction between bilingualism as an individual characteristic and bilingualism in a social group, community, region or country." so, we can roughly divide bilingualism into individual bilingualism and social bilingualism according to its distinction between language ability and language usage. But it is elusive to give bilingualism a clear definition because of its ambiguous complexity. Balanced bilingualism since childhood is advocated but it is so rare. Then what are the most important factors in raising a bilingual child?

1. A Summary on Colin Baker's Viewpoints of the Most Important Factors in Raising a Bilingual Child

In Colin Baker's book *A Parents' and Teachers' Guide to Bilingualism* （2014）， he listed sever important factors for parents, teachers or anyone interested in raising bilingual children to have a better reflection and solution to bilingual education. For example:

(1) Family factors: By “estimating children’s linguistic experience” (Baker, 2014: 19), bilingual children have more advantages in develop themselves in many perspectives: such as wider communication advantages, better cultural advantages, sharper cognitive advantages, stronger character advantages, more integrated curriculum advantages, and more independent cash advantages. ((ibid: 16) but there is a wide variety existing in bilingual families. What kind(s) of language(s) does the mother, father, siblings, or extended family (such as grandparents, uncles, aunts, etc.) speak to the child? All these bilingual family factors have a completely different impact on the child’s choice and the frequency of his or her bilingualism. Parents are the first teachers of their children, so “both parents are very important in the child’s language development”. (ibid: 22) If there exist any debates in the family on the education of raising bilingual children, “the most important destination to discuss is the long-term interests of the child,” (ibid: 23) For among family members, “such disapproval, if based on prejudice, needs meeting with more up-to-date and better-informed evidence.” (ibid: 25) “Pleasurable participation” (ibid: 26) should be encouraged while “passive medium” (ibid: 30), such as TV, should not be ignored. Through such participation in the child’s family, family cultural identity will be embedded in him / her through the fertilization of both languages and cultures. This kind of newborn identity will be “practiced and supported”

(ibid: 31) children's experience outside the home with the guide of their parents.

(2) Social factors: In fact, family factors and social factors are hard to be clearly cut off for they overlap or interweave with each other sometimes. For example: If our neighborhood is monolingual, "should we keep separate or integrate more?" (ibid: 32) Should immigrant parents decide to let go their heritage language and to "speak the host country's language in the home" (ibid: 33) to help their children more adapted in a new circumstance？ How to help "an adopted child" (ibid: 34) reach a comparatively high self-esteem or self-identity in his or her social life? What kind of school education we choose for our bilingual children? Should my child be taught bilingually "in a nursery school" (ibid: 105) or primary school (ibid: 109)) or even later (ibid: 111)? In a 'Critical Age' (Baker suggested the age of 7), "there seems little problem with children quickly adapting to the new language environment of a school." (ibid: 112) "The economy and politics of the world" (ibid: 150) is also playing an ever-lasting role in raising bilingual children.

All in all, every child is ready to become bilingual and multilingual since he or she has born, but so many are monolingual all through his or her life for different family factors and social factors encountered. After all, "Language is much about communication and identity." (ibid: 39) In raising a bilingual child, we should "provide a stimulating soil" (ibid:

40) for them to have “a pleasure, a positive and enjoyable experience” (ibid: 39) and to have “adequate exposure to both languages” (ibid: 39). But we cannot control all the process of a child’s bilingual growth, just as “The gardener cannot make the language seeds grow. All the gardeners can do is to provide certain conditions: a rich soil, light, water and careful tending.” (ibid: 40)

2. My Experiences and Viewpoints of the Most Important Factors in Raising a Bilingual Child

I cannot agree more on Colin Baker’s statement that: “Language is much about communication and identity.” (ibid: 39) Without mutual recognition or communication from our family and society, our identity as a bilingual child will never be identified. In other words, in raising a bilingual child, family factors and social factors means everything to the child just as water to fish.

I was born in a monolingual family, and my parents know nothing about English. As most ordinary child in China, I first met English as my second language in my junior middle school for it was China’s reform and opening policy in 1978 that set English, instead of Russia, as a compulsory course for most Chinese students. In the later 1980s, CET - 4 / CET - 6 had been long established to test a college student’s English proficiency. In most cases of nowadays, if you want to pass the college entrance examination or to be a postgraduate student, English is an

inevitable course that weigh one fifth in the total score of your final tests. In other words, after decades of Chinese educational reform, most Chinese youth are bilingual or even multilingual now. I think the most important factors in raising a bilingual child are as follow:

Firstly, have an extensive respect in the bilingual awareness: In raising a bilingual child, we should be aware and respect the fact that there is a linguistic and cultural flexibility existed in a child for he/she may adhere to anti-authoritarian dualism in this multilingual turn.

Anna Mendoza (2020: 304 - 305) states that since Chomsky's time, SLA researchers and sociolinguistists are lack of communication, for the former focus on study input and output through lab- or classroom-based studies in a controlled way while the latter studies language acquisition in social contexts in a natural way. Both ignore that there is a multilingual turn in SLA since the post-modernist movement. As an English major in Hunan Institute of Science and Technology, I learned English and a litter Japanese in my college days, which helped me to absorb and store many western thoughts in my mind. But in my family, my parents are very traditionally monolingual, therefore, we may have cultural conflicts in the family. For example, there is no "Lady first" in my family. If anything, there may be "children first" or "the senior first" in my family. I am neither the youngest one nor the elder in my family, so my needs in the family are often ignored so I insist everyone matters with equal rights.

Obviously, to be bilingual has many benefits, but to be bilingual suffer more cultural conflicts for you are often out of place in a monolingual family. When it comes to my daughter's education, my parents think it is enough to be bilingual while my husband and I think it is her choice to be bilingual or multilingual. She is never too young to decide which languages she wants to learn. As parents, we can guide her choice but never decide it for her. She makes the decision; she makes the effort, and she takes the results. That is the right and fair way to treat her with an extensive respect in bilingualism.

Secondly, ensure a fully exposed enjoyment in the immerse learning: With the development of science and technology, people in this world are interacting with each other more frequently than what it was ever before. Everyone is exposed in this trend of worldwide globalization, "where multilingualism is the norm, not an exception, where navigating super-diversity is routine, not a recent incursion." (Bhatt, 2013: 742) But how and how much our children should expose in a bilingual or multilingual communication is what we, as parents, can guide.

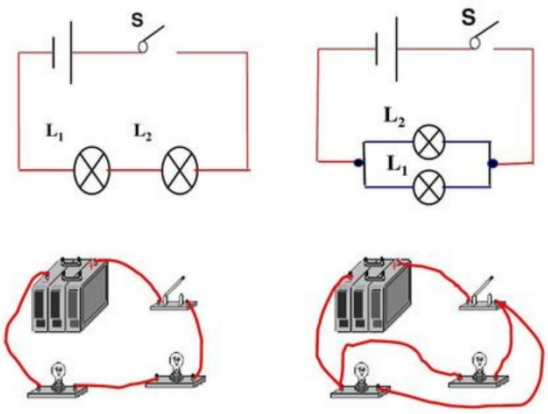
On the one hand, fully exposed immerse learning can help bilingual children have a better performance in terms of SL proficiency. By using advanced quantitative methods, Cécile De Cat (2020: 319) pointed out that: " Although bilingualism might result in an apparent delay in terms of SL proficiency in the early years of formal education, it tends to turn into

an asset once the proficiency gap between monolinguals and bilinguals has narrowed sufficiently (or closed).” Compared with monolingual children of comparable English proficiency, bilingual children demonstrate more advantages in social, emotional, and behavioral functions, especially during the linguistic critical time (about 7 years old). I met English at the age of 12 in my junior middle school, which is a litter later. So, I would like to immerse my daughter (age 2) in English songs, cartoons, communications and so on. To be fully exposed as a bilingual at an early age helps her to strike a balance in the two languages and cultures.

On the other hand, I still regret that I did not have much fun in English learning at the very beginning. In 1990s, with limited resources, we learned words and grammars by rehearsal in our school time and we have a heavy homework to do after class. What’s worse, my teacher asked our parents to check some of our English work at home, but my parents know nothing about English. It was really a struggle for my parents and I to finish that kind of task. My younger sister is lucky for my parents assigned their task to me to guide her study. The motivation for me to learn English is that knowledge is the power of self-actualization. In my society, most Chinese people are more and more optimistic about the relationship between the power of education and a successful self-actualization. Later, I came across English literature, English films

and so on. These alien culture opened my eyes and mind, and I became more and more interested in English. As the saying goes, interest is the best teacher. Yung & Chiu (2020) have studied factors affecting students' enjoyment of English Private Tutoring (EPT) in Hong Kong from four aspects: student, family, teacher and tutoring, and argues that positive feedback from all these factors, such as an external reward or a word of encouragement, will be "mediated by interest in English or English self-concept" (2020: 515) to motivate the student to achieve a better and more permanent SLA. To sum up, fully exposed enjoyment in immerse learning is one of the most significant factors in raising a bilingual child. I would like to encourage my daughter to enjoy English learning in both conscious and unconscious ways.

Last but not the least, share a deep insight into the bilingual future: No matter you are monolingual or bilingual, a successful communication is a closed circuit. But bilingual circuits are a little more complex (see picture 1) ：



Picture 1.　bilingual circuits

In picture 1. Bilingual circuits, the first one, a series circuit, is code-mixing while the second, a parallel circuit, is code-switching. My creative thinking lie in the relationship between L1 and L2 in bilingual circuits. In the first one, code-mixing, L2 has joined in the function with L1 by intermingling, while in the second one, code-switching, L2 has gotten the same status as L1 by keeping its own separate identities.

The picture here is to demonstrate that languages can coexist with each other and people can do code-mixing and code-switching freely in a communication. What we should show here is a harmonious bilingual heart. Pacheco & Hamilton (2020) advocate dual language immersion (DLI) education helps to build our bilingual love in realizing DLI's potential as "a project of equity, critical consciousness, and transformation." (2020: 568) Only with this bilingual love can we explore a deep insight into the bilingual or multilingual future.

Every language is equally capable in expressing any ideas, but fierce competition of linguistic evolution will still go on. In the future, children speak a minority language should be encouraged to learn a world language to be international talents. Therefore, generally speaking, for them, such as my daughter, who are non-English speakers, English should be encouraged to learn as a SL, while for English native children, another kind of language should be encouraged for getting a brand-new way of thinking or a understanding potential. No one is an island. We, all human

beings, are living in one community with shared future.

All in all, in raising a bilingual child, we should have an extensive respect in the bilingual awareness, ensure a fully exposed enjoyment in the bilingual immerse learning and share a deep insight into the bilingual future. The development of language is like creeks to rivers, rivers to seas, etc. It is a dynamic interweaving evolution. It is never a dead water. In raising a bilingual child, individuals should push themselves in this trend of globalization with vigor and energy, and families and societies should also join hands in creating a bilingual circumstance for them to achieve their fully potential. In a word, we are an integrated whole.

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