

HPEN7006

Current Theories of Second Language Acquisition

Assignment 1: Essay & Report

Important Factors of Raising a Bilingual Child

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Name: Jiahui Xiao

Student number: 2000299

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Introduction

More parents are now thinking of raising their children bilingually, for which they believe, and also has been proved by the majority of the studies, that bilingualism can bring a number of cognitive, academic and economic advantages (Danjo, 2018).

Bilingualism is, however, a rather complex phenomenon than people simply speaking two languages, and it has different dimensions in terms of the degree and function of language abilities and language use (Baker, 2001, p.3). That is to say, in reality the language proficiency of bilinguals can vary enormously. Parents, therefore, have questions about how to raise balanced bilingual more successfully. This essay will firstly discuss the important factors in raising a bilingual child, based on the points given in Colin Baker's books *A Parents' and Teachers' Guide to Bilingualism* (2014) and *Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* (2010), which will be followed by a report to parents regarding specific family language strategies.

Part A: Important factors in raising a bilingual child

1. Children only want to learn when it is enjoyable

Failure in becoming a bilingual happens if children associate language learning with unpleasant experience, such as parents' endless correction of grammar, or worry of being left behind in language speaking compared with peers. Obviously, children need motivation which usually comes from the fun of learning (Baker, 2014, p.39).

There are many ways parents can do to make the learning process enjoyable. Firstly, children need constant encouragement to build their 'language ego' (Baker, 2014, p.39), so, a 'well done' or a pat on the back can work magically, especially when children switch to their weaker language. Additionally, parents and teachers can

involve language learning in interesting and novel activities, such as playing a funny game with friends or visiting a sport event, which will bring more joy in the natural learning process and stimulate children's language growth (Baker, 2014, p.29). This is also true in terms of L2 reading and writing. It's better for reading materials to have more natural, humorous, imaginative and culturally relevant stories (Baker, 2014, p.96).

2. Exposure matters

To obtain a relatively balanced bilingualism, adequate and high-quality exposure of both languages is absolutely crucial.

In terms of the quantity, a constant and continuous input is required. It is believed that the minimum exposure level for one language to functionally proceed well is 30% of the total language exposure, under which the development in that language would be delayed or incomplete (Baker, 2014, p.39). Therefore, factors such as family language strategies, school's language policy and how much they support different languages and cultures need to be taken into consideration.

In terms of the quality, it is about richness, interaction and professionalism of the input sources. To establish the language richness, parents can introduce appropriate use of words in different situations, or extend the vocabulary from family chores to more community-used words (Baker, 2014, p.28). Moreover, passive knowledge is not enough and active participation in that language is necessary (Baker, 2014, p.65). For example, learning through singing music in L2 or interactively playing with friends speaking L2, instead of only listening. Furthermore, in developing children's reading and writing skills, parents can choose more professionally designed dual-language books from renowned publishing houses (Baker, 2014, p.101).

3. You just need more patience

Like waiting a delicate seed to grow up, children's language development also takes time. Researchers (Baker, 2014, p.42; Snow & Hoefnagel-Hohle, 1978) find out that children generally learn L2 at a rate slower than teenagers and adults, that is to say parents and teachers need to be patient. It needs to be more careful when dealing with teenagers who are often more rebellious, or it may lead to negative results if they feel being compelled in language learning (Baker, 2014, p.73).

Additionally, it's normal for children to have a 'silent' period in language learning. But not to speak doesn't necessarily mean that they do not understand, and children are actually absorbing the linguistic knowledge, and such case is called passive bilingualism which can easily switch into active bilingualism if given continuous exposure (Baker, 2014, p.72). It is crucial for parents to stay patient at this stage and not to give up talking to their children in that 'silent' language, otherwise, it may be lost very rapidly.

4. Bilingualism and biculturalism

Purpose of language is communication, in between not only different people, but also different cultures, because language embodies culture, family attachment, social connections and community belongingness. Therefore, a better understanding of two cultures and a deeper affection towards families or friends who speak the minority language (mL) will help children become more active in their mL. In this case, having a vacation at mL-speaking country or paying a visit to grandparents who speak mL will be successful endeavours to ignite children's motivation of learning that language by strengthening cultural ties (Baker, 2014, pp.29-32).

Similarly, it is crucial for children to feel supportive to speak two languages, mL in particular, in schools and communities. Children are very sensitive to cultural identity, and even a very young child can sense whether one language has any negative associations – this can be related to the cultural dynamic or power difference between two languages (Lightbown & Spada, 2000), which may discourage children from using that language (Baker, 2014, p.72). Parents need to ensure a positive cultural environment.

Case studies

The aforementioned important factors are well reflected in real-life cases. Two of my nieces (named Dudu and Domi) who are both 41 months old and learning Chinese (L1) and English (L2) can be good examples of contrast analysis. First, we need to admit that it is extremely hard for a family comprising of 100% Chinese people to teach the child English due to lack of adequate exposure of English in a Chinese-dominant society, so both Dudu and Domi speak limited English while very fluently in Chinese.

Dudu's case

Although both limited in English, two girls' levels of English still vary dramatically. One great distinction between Dudu and Domi in their L2 learning is the English exposure outside of the home. Living with her parents in Shenzhou, a highly-developed coastal city of China where many foreigners are working and living, Dudu has an easy access to English speaking environment in school and community, for example, there are English-speaking kids living in the same residential area or playing in the same kindergarten, and Dudu is always eager to talk to them. More interestingly, Dudu works out her own funny and communicative way of speaking 'English' – she speaks in natural intonation of English, but with her self-made 'words' which are not English words at all when it comes to describe a certain thing that she

doesn't know how to say in English. Dudu's foreign friends, though may have no clue at the first place, will eventually get to know what Dudu wants in their interactions and games and will then speak the appropriate words in describing that certain thing and then Dudu will learn it and use it next time. Such a magic and pleasant way of learning in which Dudu enjoys so much, and it helps a lot in language learning.

Domi's case

On the contrary, Domi lives in Wuhan with her parents and grandparents, and she is not much exposed to English in both inside and outside of the home, because the dominant family language is Chinese, though the mother speaks English occasionally, and unlike Shenzhen, there are not many bilingual pre-schools in Wuhan as it is an in-land city without many foreign residents, making it even harder for Domi to have any enjoyable learning experience.

As a result, it's not surprising that Dudu performs better in English than Domi, which examine the significance of aforementioned factors in bilingual development.

Part B Report to parents: Family language policies



Family Language Policy In raising a bilingual child

A Report to Parents

Since most children won't start schooling until 5 or 6 years old, family is usually the place where children can get most of their language input and communication opportunities during their most critical linguistically formative years. As a parent, you don't want to miss the significant family support in children's bilingual development. A great number of scholars (e.g., Schwartz 2008; De Houwer 2009, etc.) have already proved the link between family language policies (FLP) and children's command of two languages.

Having recognised the importance of FLP, you may have questions such as "what FLP options do I have?", "what would be my best choice?", or "what do I need to consider when implementing a certain choice?". These questions will be answered in this report.

1. What FLP options do I have?

There are three major strategies:

(1) One person-one language (OPOL)

This is the most widely known strategy and, as its name suggests, it means each parent speaks in a different language and only in that language to the child from birth (Baker, 2014, p.10). The major purpose of doing this is to clearly separate two languages at the beginning so to avoid children's confusion of two languages.

There are two subtypes of OPOL if we look at the language used in between parents, for this is also a crucial source of children's language input. There are **OPOL-ML** (Majority-language strongest) which refers to the situation that majority language is being used between the parents, and **OPOL-mL** (minority-language strongest) which refers to the situation when minority language is used most in the family (Barron-Hauwaert, 2004).

(2) Minority-language at home (mL@H)

This is the language strategy for families where both parents speak only minority language at home (Bouko, et al., 2020, p.26). Because usually the majority language (ML) is the sole or dominant language in the local community, bringing sufficient exposure of ML already, but mL, on the other hand, seems to be learnt only at home. So, to use mL as much as possible at home would be a reasonable strategy to maintain more balanced exposure of two languages.

(3) Time and Place strategy (T&P)

This approach focuses on an arrangement that parents and children agree to speak a different language at either a certain time or a particular place (Bouko, et al., 2020, p.26), such as in immersion schools or when families gather around for dinner. This method, however, is rare in bilingual families (Barron-Hauwaert, 2004, p.175) as it only provides limited exposure and depends too much on external situations and children's awareness of switching to another language.



2. What would be my best option choice?

Parents have different **motivations** in deciding which language(s) to speak at home. Some aim to balance the exposure amount of two languages, so their choice more depends on the type(s) and frequency of language to which the child is exposed outside of the home. Some value the heritage language and the culture of the country of origin which they believe need to be passed on to the next generation, and therefore they emphasise their original language. On the contrary, others hope their children can be more integrated to the local community who speaks the ML, so in such case, mL would be regarded as supplement and only be taught at some special occasions.

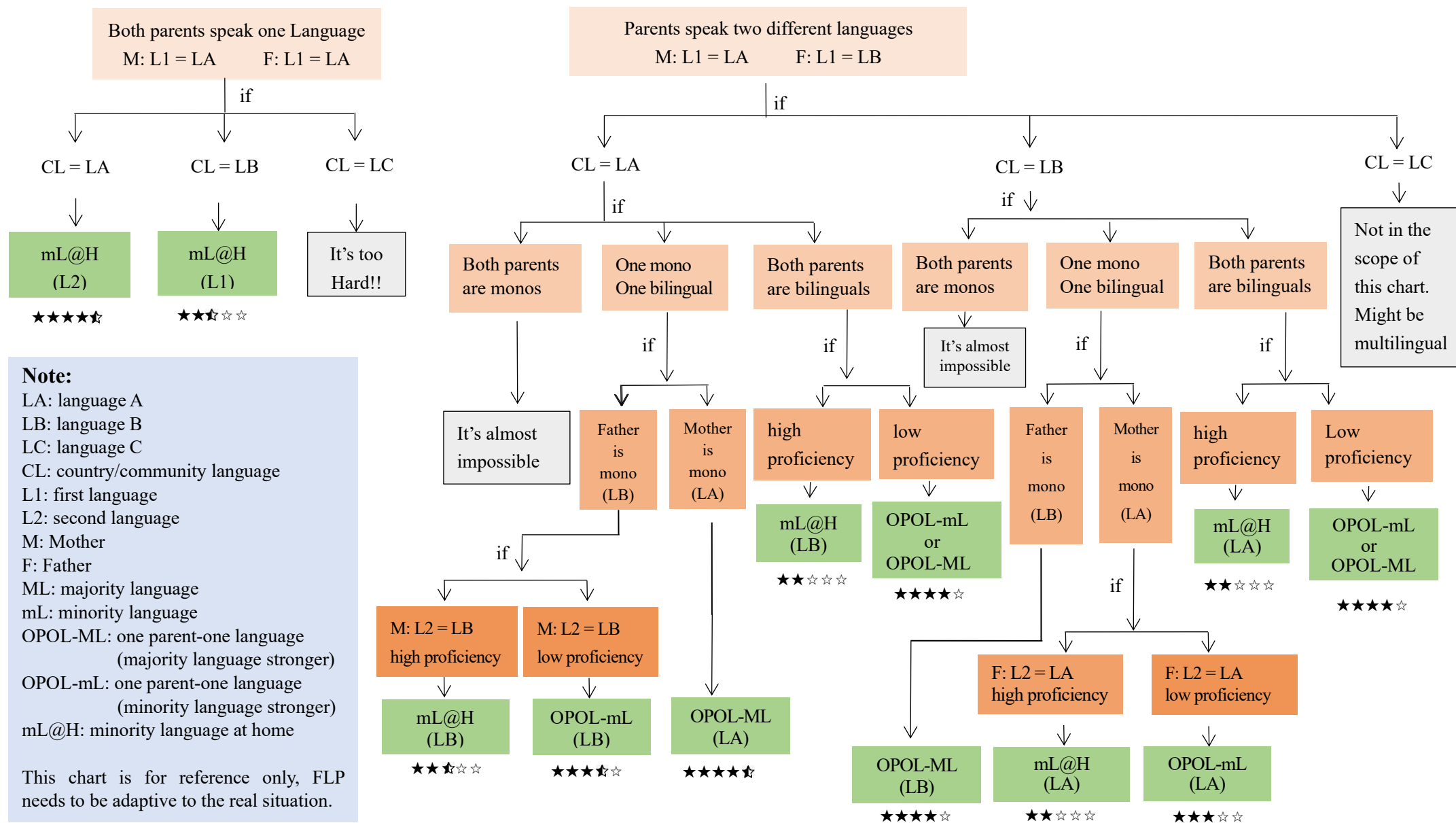
Another interesting factor that you may want to consider when selecting the FLP is different **father-mother language combination**. There has been much research done on this point, and it turns out that the toddler, especially before school age, is more inclined to talk with the mother as oppose to the father and therefore develop mother's language faster, as the result of the natural mother-child closeness (Coates, 1988).

Furthermore, parents' varying **degrees of language proficiency** will be tricky too. Ideally, each parent will select their native language (Bouko, 2020, p.25), but this is not always the case. For those parents who both have mL as their L2, speech in mL sometimes can be unnatural, unauthentic or artificial.

Activity

Putting the above together, let's find out your best option of FLP among OPOL-ML, OPOL-mL and mL@H, the three most recognised approaches, assuming your goal is to promote balanced bilingualism. In the chart below, you pick based on your situation, then you will be led to your best FLP strategy, as well as how much difficult in reaching your goal through that strategy, ranking from "not very hard" (★☆☆☆☆) to "extremely hard" (★★★★★).

Goal: To raise a bilingual child in LA & LB



3. What do I need to consider when implementing the FLP in real life?

While the definition of each FLP is just a few sentences, the actual employment can be very complicated, even frustrated sometimes. By discussing the following possible challenges that you may encounter, we help you to be better prepared.

(1) Support from family members

How much do you and your partner care about raising your child bilingually? Both parents' beliefs in bringing up children bilingually and your chosen FLP can be more influential on its success than you think. This is called *impact belief* (De Houwer, 1999), which will be higher with more passionate commitment, and subsequently lead to more success in child's bilingual development.

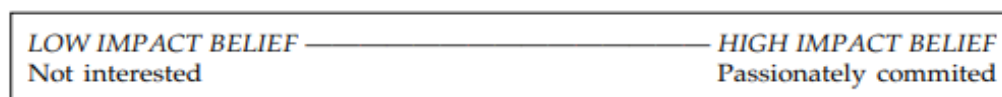


Figure 1. De Houwer's impact belief, (adapted from De Houwer, 1999)

Moreover, many researches (e.g., Baker, 2014; Barron-Hauwaert, 2004) have proved the importance of engaging grandparents and other family members to support agreed FLP as early as possible. Some failure cases illustrated in these books, on the other hand, involve the situation that the grandparents are against Children speaking the other language for 'they couldn't understand it'. Therefore, gaining support from extended families at an early stage is crucial.



(2) Continuity vs. Flexibility

Continuity and consistency in FLP are not only about linguistic development, for lacking of it may lead to unbalanced exposure or children's confusion, but also from a social-emotional viewpoint, because young children attach emotional bonding to their parents' language choice (Hult, 2014). Even in some cases, when parents somehow shift the family language, from mL to ML for example, children may show avoidance or refuse to mL, because they "sense" the superiority of ML over mL in the family, which can be counterproductive to bilingual growth (Barron-Hauwaert, 2004, p.35). It is suggested that parents should adhere to their FLP to children reaching at least 4 years old because this is the time when they usually transform from being pre-verbal to being fluent speakers (Houwer & Bornstein, 2016).

However, experts find out that parents with OPOL in real life do not necessarily separate two languages strictly (Kasuya, 1998), -- code-switching is a typical phenomenon of language mix, and they argue that, instead of a strategy, OPOL is more like a 'language choice framework' (Dopke, 1998), under which a reasonable level of flexibility should be allowed, in which case more time would be needed for children to understand and adapt.



(3) Child's attitude towards FLP

Like analysed in Part I, children need to have an encouraging environment and positive attitude towards learning an additional language. A negative case is Rachel's family which introduces very strict OPOL policy. She imposes the use of French to the child in their conversations and deliberately ignore child's speeches produced in English despite the fact that she can actually understand, making her daughter frustrated and annoyed, which further leads to her resentment towards her mother and little enthusiasm in talking in French (Curd-christiansen,2009).

(4) Language limit of parents

Things will become trickier if one or two parents have some language barriers. For example, being a monolingual, especially in mL, one parent can easily feel isolated when he or she cannot understand what the child says in another language with your partner (Barron-Hauwaert, 2004, p.123), which may discourage you from maintaining FLP. Also, when the mL is the L2 of both parents, they need to be careful about possible incorrect or unnatural expressions that they may pass on to their children. Moreover, parents with low proficiency of L2 may be uncomfortable to talk in L2 with their child in public.

(5) Environment change



Changes in surroundings, such as new siblings or move to a new community, etc., will have an effect on your language strategies too (Barron-Hauwaert, 2004), and therefore, FLP needs to be adaptable.

Summary:

Suggestion Box

- Major FLP strategies include OPOL-ML, OPOL-mL and mL@H.
- When choosing FLP, you need to consider parents' motivations, exposure amount of two languages, father-mother language combination and parents' language proficiency.
- FLP is a strategic and consistent way of language development with a certain level of adaptability, creativity and flexibility.
- Support from family members and children's positive attitudes towards FLP are crucial.
- Parents need to think about their own language ability, and in case of low proficiency in one certain language, hiring a nanny speaking that language can be a useful alternative.
- FLP needs to be adaptive to changes such as new siblings.

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