

2013 Spring Lecture Series
“Promoting School Readiness and Achievement”

Bilingualism and school-aged children: What we know and where we go from here
April 26, 2013

Raúl Rojas, Ph.D., CCC-SLP
Assistant Professor, Communication Sciences and Disorders
Director, Bilingual Language Lab
The University of Texas at Dallas

Bilingualism in children: What we know

- Fetuses respond uniquely to intonation and rhythmic patterns from different languages.
- Infants begin to “tune in” their speech perception to their native language(s) ~11 months.
- Toddlers raised bilingually differentiate and use their languages as expected in specific contexts (e.g., match their language with monolingual speakers/environments).
- Children learning a second language in school often go through a “silent period” (listen more than they speak), which can last several weeks, months, or even a year.
- Code-switching (using two languages in same phrase) by bilingual children and adults follows rule-based grammatical patterns, and represents normal behavior in bilinguals.
- Bilingual children exhibit cross-linguistic transfer (linguistic resources in each language support the other) across all domains of language as well as early literacy skills such as phonological awareness.
- School-aged Spanish-speaking children in the U.S. exhibit language-specific patterns of language growth over time: aggressive English growth during the academic year; alternating periods of fast and slow Spanish growth.
- Children with communication (speech-language), cognitive (e.g., Down syndrome), and social development (e.g., autism spectrum) disorders can develop bilingually.
- Healthy bilingual development is possible for *all* children, as long as exposure to adequate language models and academic support is provided for both languages.

Commonly held myths of “language confusion” are exactly that: Myths!

- Research evidence shows that children do not undergo “language confusion” when exposed to two (or more) languages.
- Children developing bilingually differentiate and use languages appropriately.
- Bilingual children coordinate and negotiate information across their languages.
- Bilingualism does not cause communication disorders, and monolingualism does not cure them.
- The language skills of bilingual children will likely differ in their two languages, and will not be identical to the language skills of monolingual children.
- Proficiency in the native and second language is associated with quantity *and* quality of exposure and support to each language.

School-aged bilingual children: The reality and the challenge

- English language learners (ELLs), children with negligible English proficiency, are projected to represent ~30% of the school-aged population by 2025.
- Majority (75%) of ELLs are Spanish-speaking.
- Long-standing academic achievement gap between ELLs and non-ELLs.
- ELLs are expected to perform academically as well as monolingual English students as quickly as possible in an unfamiliar language.
- Without native language support, ELLs are likely to undergo language loss, which can cause severe problems academically, socially, culturally, and with family.
- ELLs tend to live in socio-economically disadvantaged and segregated neighborhoods.
- Just as low expectations for ELLs are not ideal, setting high expectations without providing adequate support is not realistic.

My child is learning English as a second language: What can I do?

- *DO*:
 - Speak, sing, and read to/with your child in the language(s) you are most comfortable using, even if that is not English.
 - Involve family and age-appropriate peers, whether they speak the native language and/or English.
 - Communicate with your child's teacher(s) and become involved in homework and school activities.
 - If you prefer to read and write in your native language, request that school-paperwork to be provided in your language.
 - If you prefer to communicate in your native language, request an interpreter for school-based meetings regarding your child.
- *DO NOT*:
 - Interact with your child in language(s) you are not comfortable or proficient in.
 - Limit contact with family or age-appropriate peers that do not speak English.
 - Assume that your child's academic success is *only* dependent on the school.
 - Be timid about your involvement in your child's education, even if you are not comfortable or proficient in English.

Web-based resources (available bilingually in English, Spanish, and other languages)

¡Colorín colorado! (Information and resources for parents, educators, and other professionals)

<http://www.colorincolorado.org>

National Literacy Trust (Quick tips for parents available bilingually in 12 languages)

http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/talk_to_your_baby/resources/418_q-hello

Acquiring English as a Second Language (What is "normal" and what is not)

<http://www.asha.org/public/speech/development/easl.htm>

Books

Bilingual Language Development and Disorders in Spanish-English Speakers (Second Edition) by Brian A. Goldstein (2012).

The Education of English Language Learners: Research to Practice by Marilyn Shatz and Louise C. Wilkinson (2010).