Bilingualism in a Plurilingual Canada Podcast Series

Growing Up Bilingual, by Fred Genesee

Author
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Summary
Fred Genesee shares some reflections that parents in particular as well as teachers will find useful on the implications and benefits associated with children learning two languages or more early on in childhood.

Facts
- Many children around the world learn more than one language, and they do this in different ways. Some children learn two, or more, languages from birth; some begin to learn a second language when they go to daycare or preschool; and an increasing number of children learn a second language in bilingual or immersion programs in school.
- Research has shown that learning two languages from birth is just as normal as learning only one language. Children raised bilingually go through the same milestones at the same age as children learning the same languages monolingually. In other words, learning two languages at the same time does not interfere with or slow down language acquisition if children are acquiring two languages. Much less is known about children who learn three or more languages.
- While learning two languages at the same time is just as natural as learning one, it is not automatic. Children need sufficient and consistent exposure to two languages if they are to acquire full proficiency in both. It has been estimated that children need at least 40-50% exposure to each language to acquire both fully.
Parents and professionals often express concern about raising children with language learning impairment bilingually. However, there is not evidence that such children are at enhanced risk for language difficulties if they learn two languages. Research conducted at McGill University found that children with language impairment who were raised bilingually in English and French were no more impaired than monolingual children with language impairment learning the same languages.

Parents often wonder if they should use the one-parent/one-language rule when raising children bilingually in order to minimize the chances that their children will become confused if each parent uses both languages. There is no evidence that children learning two languages simultaneously become confused whether their parents use this rule or not. As long as most people in the child’s community separate their two languages most of the time, bilingual children will also separate their two languages.

Bilingual children often mix their two languages in the same sentence or conversation; this is called code-mixing or code-switching. It is often thought that this is a sign that the child is confused and/or that they are not learning either language properly. However, careful research on child bilingual code-mixing indicates that when children mix their languages they do so in a way that does not violate the grammar of either language.

Further Reading
