Myth vs. Fact in Bilingual Language Development

Considerations for Assessment and Intervention

Kimberly Edmonds, MS, CCC-SLP
kcedmonds.slp@gmail.com

Disclosures

- I have no financial or non-financial relationships to disclose.

Objectives

- Participants will identify common myths related to bilingual language development.
- Participants will describe second-language learning in simultaneous and sequential bilinguals.
- Participants will describe factors to consider in the bilingual assessment process.
- Participants will identify strategies to support a bilingual approach to intervention.

Terms

- Bilingual: A person with a past, present and/or future need to communicate in more than one language. (Kohnert 2008)
- Monolingual: A person who functionally communicates in one language.
- English Language Learner (ELL): Used in the United States to describe a person who is acquiring English as a second language; sometimes referred to as “English Learner” (EL) or “Limited English Proficient” (LEP). The more general “second-language learner” may also be used.
- English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL): General education program that supports language acquisition for students learning English as a second language; also referred to as ESL
- Majority vs. Minority Language(s): Language(s) spoken by the majority/used in mainstream culture vs. language(s) spoken by a subset of the population
- Primary Language (L1): The first language (or “native language”) a person learns from birth; the term “home language” may be used to distinguish it from the majority language.
- Second Language (L2): A language that is learned in addition to the primary language
- Language Proficiency: Level of skill in a particular language
- Language Dominance: A comparison of proficiencies in two or more languages; degree of bilingualism
Evidence Based Practice

Who is Bilingual?

A bilingual approach should be considered for...

- A child from a non-English speaking home
- A child from a bilingual home
- Internationally-adopted children
- A child who has participated in a language immersion or bilingual education program
- A child who has lived and/or attended school in a non-English speaking country

Types of Bilingualism

Simultaneous Bilingual: A person who learns two languages from a young age (typically prior to age 2)
- May or may not be an ELL, depending on exposure
- May demonstrate second-language phenomena

Sequential Bilingual: A person who begins learning a second language after acquiring the native language
- Most ELLs are sequential bilinguals
- Demonstrate various second-language phenomena, impacted by proficiency level

Fact: Children who are exposed to two languages from birth generally meet developmental milestones on time, suggesting that learning two languages is not inherently difficult.

Myth #1:
Learning two languages at once is difficult.
OR
Bilingualism causes language delays.

Advanced English proficiency ≠ Monolingual English
Simultaneous Bilingualism: Early Milestones

- Onset of babbling parallels monolinguals (Oller, Eilers, Urbano & Cobo-Lewis 1997; Maneva & Genesee 2002)
- Production of first words falls in the same age range as monolinguals (Genesee 2003; Patterson & Pearson 2004)
- Vocabulary development falls within average range, when both languages are considered (Conboy & Thal 2006; Pearson, Fernandez & Oller 1993)
- Emergence of 2-word combinations falls in the same age range as monolinguals (Conboy & Thal 2006; Marchman et al 2004)

Myth #2:
Children are like sponges, they can soak up a new language quickly.

Fact: For sequential bilinguals, learning a second language is a process; achieving native-like proficiency can take several years and is dependent on exposure.

Sequential Bilingualism: BICS vs. CALP

**Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS):** Everyday, conversational language; tends to be more concrete and context-embedded (nonverbal cues, visuals, actions, etc.); takes about 2-3 years to develop

**Cognitive-Academic Language Proficiency (CALP):** Language of academics; tends to be more abstract and context-reduced; takes about 5-7 years to develop
Stages of Second-Language Acquisition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Approximate Time Frame</th>
<th>Teacher Focuses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preproduction</td>
<td>The student has minimal comprehensiveness, knows no vocabulary, uses “yes” and “no”</td>
<td>0-6 months</td>
<td>How do you ...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>What is ... ?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Who has ... ?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Speech sounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Production</td>
<td>The student has limited comprehensiveness, produces one- or two-word utterances, participates using key words and familiar phonemes, makes pronunciation errors</td>
<td>6 months-1 year</td>
<td>How do you ...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>东西 what do you ...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>多少 does the child ...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Who has ... ?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech Emergence</td>
<td>The student has good comprehensiveness, can produce simple sentences, makes grammatical and pronoun errors, frequently mixes elements of phonemes</td>
<td>1-3 years</td>
<td>能够说 what do you think ...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>多少 can the child ...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>多少 does the child ...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate Fluency</td>
<td>The student has enhanced comprehensiveness, makes few grammatical errors</td>
<td>3-5 years</td>
<td>能够说 what is the weather like ...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>多少 does the child ...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Fluency</td>
<td>The student has a comprehensive level of speech.</td>
<td>5-7 years</td>
<td>能够说 what do you think ...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>多少 does the child ...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Second-Language Phenomena

**Silent Period:** During early exposure to a second language, the learner focuses on listening and developing comprehension. Very little expressive language is produced during this time.

- Is the child following classroom routines?
- Is the child developing language comprehension?
- Is the child participating non-verbally?
- Is the child using compensatory strategies?

**Transfer/Interference:** The second-language learner may apply the rules of one language to the other.

- Are the errors expected for the child's proficiency level?
- Are the errors typical of speakers from the same language background?
- Does the child respond to explicit instruction to address the errors?

Myth #3: Bilingual children get confused.

**Fact:** Bilingual children do sometimes demonstrate interaction between their two language systems, but this is not a sign of confusion.

Second-Language Phenomena (cont.)

**Language Loss:** The second-language learner may demonstrate a plateau in development ("arrest") or loss of proficiency ("attrition") in one language.

- Has the child's home situation/language experience changed recently?

**Code-Switching:** Switching from one language to the other within a sentence or conversation (also referred to as "code-mixing").

- Do peers or adults from the same language background have difficulty understanding the child?
**Approaches to Raising Bilingual Kids**

**One Parent, One Language:** One parent exclusively speaks L1, while the other exclusively speaks L2 (previously recommended as the "right" way to teach two languages)

**Home Language at Home:** Only L1 is spoken in the home

**Bilingual:** Both L1 and L2 are spoken in the home

---

**Myth #4:**

Children with disabilities can't be bilingual.

**Fact:** Although there’s a need for more research, the information we have to date suggests that children with disabilities can become bilingual, without experiencing greater difficulty than monolingual peers with the same disability.

---

**Bilingualism and Communication Disorders**

- Children with Down syndrome (DS) can acquire two languages; their language profiles are similar to monolingual children with DS (Kay-Raining Bird, Cleave, Trudeau, Thordardottir, Sutton & Thorpe 2005)
- Second-language learners with Specific Language Impairment (SLI) exhibit language profiles and proficiency levels that are similar to monolingual peers with SLI (Rothweiler, Chilla & Clahsen 2009)
- Second-language learners with SLI exhibit the same level of delay as monolingual children with SLI, when compared to their respective peer groups (Paradis & Sorenson Duncan 2009)
- Case studies indicate that children on the autism spectrum can acquire two languages; maintaining a bilingual environment increases opportunities for social interaction (see [Archived Posts: Bilingualism and Autism Spectrum Disorders](http://blog.bilingualtherapies.com/archived-posts/bilingualism-and-autism-spectrum-disorders) for further insights and references related to this topic)

---

**Myth #5:**

Parents should just speak English to their children.

**Fact:** Most bilingual children, including those with disabilities, need both languages to fully participate in their families, schools, and communities.
Potential Impact of a Monolingual Approach

- Poorer language and literacy models, due to parent’s lack of proficiency or comfort level in English
- Less interaction between the child and his family members, including extended family that may live outside the United States
- Less participation in social, religious and educational activities that take place in the child’s cultural community
- Loss of home language skills, which can limit social, educational and vocational opportunities in the future

Bilingual Contexts: Additive vs. Subtractive

Factors to Consider in Bilingual Assessment

Least-Biased Assessment Process

- Pre-Referral via record review, caregiver interview, and informal assessment
- Assessment that measures BICS and CALP in both languages
- Converging evidence to differentiate a difference from a disorder
Pre-Referral: Medical & Developmental History

- Family’s concerns
- Previous evaluations or services?
- What does the family think is causing the problem?
  - Gives insight to the family’s beliefs, cultural values, and possibly past trauma
- Birth/medical history
- Where was the child born? If out-of-country, at what age did they arrive?
  - Language exposure out-of-country will be different than within the United States
- Developmental milestones
- How does the child’s development/progress compare to other children from their language community (siblings, cousins, friends, etc.)?
  - Due to lack of norms, best to compare child to their cultural/linguistic peer group
- What kind of progress or change has the family seen over the past 6 months?
  - Gives insight to the child’s language learning over time (dynamic vs. static measure)

Pre-Referral: Family Background

- Home country
- Parents’ primary language(s)
  - Same or different? Native or second-language speakers of English?
- How long have the parents lived in the United States?
  - Gives insight to the family’s level of acculturation
- Parental education level
  - Be aware that some parents may be non-readers and/or very limited schooling
- Who lives in the home and/or provides regular care for the child?
  - Be aware these individuals may speak other languages
- Recent changes in the family?
  - Changes due to immigration status?
- Family history of speech or language problems?

Pre-Referral: Language Experience

- Language(s) spoken in the home
  - Ask about ALL languages, not just those used with the child
- Who speaks the home language with the child? Who speaks English?
- When did the child start learning English?
  - Simultaneous or sequential?
- Child’s use of home language and English
  - Gives insight to the child’s overall language dominance
- Child’s exposure to home language and English outside of home
  - Gives insight to the child’s language dominance outside the home
- Contact with family’s home country
  - Phone calls, visits (to or from), etc.

Pre-Referral: Educational History

- Schools attended
- Schooling out-of-country? Language(s) of instruction?
- Attendance record
  - Gaps due to lack of resources (out-of-country)? Gaps due to immigration or travel?
- Report cards; state assessments
- Response to Intervention (RTI) data
- English proficiency testing and current ESOL services
  - Progress over time? Consistency (or lack thereof) across domains?
Pre-Referral: Language Skills

- What does the family see as the child’s strengths and weaknesses?
- How does the child demonstrate understanding, follow directions, etc. in their natural environment?
- How does the child express themselves in their natural environment?

→ Gather additional data via language sampling and/or informal assessment tasks in BOTH languages

Language Dominance

- Impacted by multiple factors
- Varies by task/context
- Changes over time

→ Useful for assessment planning and interpretation of results

Assessment: The Conundrum of Standardized Measures

✗ May not be normed on students from the same language or cultural background
  → Standard scores are NOT valid
✗ May test language proficiency, rather than the target skill
✗ May not take second language phenomena into account
✗ May contain pictures, vocabulary, or concepts that are unfamiliar due to the student’s cultural background

Assessment: Alternatives to Standardized Measures

- Review of pre-referral information
  - Identify risk factors and indicators of disability
- Observation
  - Evaluate presence and impact of second-language phenomena
- Language samples
  - Compare to developmental norms in primary language AND English (taking proficiency level into account)
- Dynamic Assessments (Test-Teach-Retest):
  - RTI data; portfolio method
  - Informal assessments
  - Non-standard administration of formal assessments
  ➢ See Gutierrez-Clenlen & Peña 2001 for a tutorial on DA
Assessment: Bilingual Accommodations and Modifications

- Present items bilingually (collaborate with an interpreter)
- Allow additional time and/or repetitions
- Give additional or alternative practice items
- Re-phrase directions, prompts, or questions
- Clarify unfamiliar vocabulary or concepts
- Perform below-age-range testing and/or continue beyond the student’s ceiling
- Replace or eliminate items that are culturally inappropriate
- Accept appropriate responses in either language (conceptual scoring)
- Accept responses that demonstrate second language transfer or developmental errors (appropriate to proficiency level)
- Make note of student’s comments or explanations; prompt for more information (“Can you tell me more?”)

Determining Difference vs. Disorder: Converging Evidence

- Lack of developmentally appropriate skills in both languages
- Difficulties unrelated to second language phenomena or cultural differences
- Difficulties despite adequate opportunity to learn
- Poor response to Dynamic Assessment Measures
- Communication Disorder
- Pre-Referral Risk Factors/Indicators

Determining the Language of Intervention

- Needs across languages
  - What skills are we targeting? In what contexts?
- Language dominance (strengths) related to the target skill/context
- Family’s motivation to maintain home language
- Resources available for conducting bilingual intervention
  - Bilingual SLP
  - Interpreter or bilingual paraprofessional
  - Home program to support L1

Strategies to Support Bilingual Intervention

- Sometimes the questions are complicated and the answers are simple
  ~Dr. Seuss
Supporting Development in Both Languages

Bilingual Approach: Targets skills which are shared by both languages
- Aspects of language form or content which are similar
- Underlying cognitive-linguistic skills, such as:
  - Attention/Memory
  - Semantic knowledge

Cross Linguistic Approach: Targets skills which are unique to each language
- Aspects of language form or content which are distinct

Matching Intervention to Language Acquisition

Strategies Checklist
- ★ Use a multi-modal approach
- ★ Provide background knowledge that may be culturally-influenced
- ★ Preview-Review material
- ★ Rephrase and restate information
- ★ Focus on content and allow for developmental errors
- ★ Incorporate the child’s home culture in therapy activities
- ★ Incorporate (when possible) the child’s home language in therapy activities
- ★ Encourage child to use and develop L1

“A disorder in bilinguals is not caused by bilingualism or cured by monolingualism”

(Kohnert 2008)
Questions?

Additional Resources

ASHA Multicultural Affairs and Resources

¡Colorín colorado!

PaTTAN
Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network

Works Cited


