

Case Study 7

Advising Parents on Bilingual Education of Their Children

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Introduction

Experts in intercultural communication may be asked to give advice about raising children bilingually. Everyday life provides massive evidence that children can easily cope with two or more languages. Yet, when the decision has to be taken about their own offspring, parents are in doubt: “Will two languages confuse my child?”, “Will my child have a language delay?”. Research in the last two decades has shown that learning two languages does not jeopardize children’s cognitive and linguistic development (Serratrice, 2013). However, parental concern about this issue is multi-layered. It is the intercultural communication expert’s task to address these concerns one by one, offering research-based information, providing parents with the knowledge they need to take their own decisions. This chapter presents a consultancy case study that specifically addresses the linguistic aspects of intercultural society: it concerns children growing up with two languages. This case clearly shows the relevant competencies of an intercultural expert and the way in which these can be employed to improve intercultural communication.

The Case

It is natural, and for some people it is the only option, to use their mother tongue when communicating with their children. The first language is the language learnt in childhood, the language of affections, of emotions. How could parents possibly use a different language to address their children? Yet other people may show some irritation when hearing parents address their children in a language they do not understand. Although research has shown that raising children bilingually has no negative effects, still not only lay-people but also professionals fear that using a minority language will damage the development of the community language, in this specific case Dutch. This explains parents’ reluctance to raise their children with two languages.

Working in second language acquisition research brings us researchers in contact with bilingual families (mixed marriages, expatriates, migrants).¹ They all use some form of bilingual policy in raising their children. As long as the children are young and spend a great deal of time in the family, this is not a problem. However, as soon as the children start going to school, social pressure increases and parents start feeling insecure about their bilingual educational choices. After discussing these issues with many parents, it became clear to us that sceptical voices about bilingualism often originate in a lack of information about this phenomenon. We then decided to instigate knowledge dissemination initiatives to enable bilingual families to make informed choices among alternatives. The present chapter describes the steps that were taken in the context of BIMU (Bi/Multilingualism at Utrecht) to develop consultancy for parents wanting to raise their children with two languages.

Parents had two main questions:

- a. Will two languages confuse my child?
- b. Will two languages provide a language delay?

Before addressing these questions, we thought it was important to determine our clients' profile (cultural background and socio-economic status) and their motivation for raising their children bilingually. Our clients were mostly young mixed families, migrants and expats that had recently moved to the Netherlands. It is important to note that their socio-economic status (SES) ranged from middle to high. Most of these people had an academic degree and spoke English. Therefore, communication outside the home was never problematic. These people were knowledgeable about bilingualism and were conscious of their right to keep alive their mother tongue. However, they felt insecure about possible negative consequences for their children at a cognitive level. Although raising a child bilingually is becoming more common in the Netherlands, parents are aware that this is not the norm and feel that they have to justify their choice. What our clients requested was recent, research-based information in order to have sound arguments to justify their bilingual choice. However, we thought it was also important to know the reasons for these parents for wanting to pass their minority language on to their children. In our view the motivational aspect of bilingual education is often neglected, which interferes with a mutual understanding between its advocates and its opponents. An intercultural communication expert, particularly in his or her role as mediator, should be aware of the reasons parents have for wanting to teach their own language to their children. As Blom (2015) shows in a survey he conducted with participants in the Growing Up Bilingual workshops at Utrecht University, parents want their children to be able to communicate with family members that only speak the minority language. They also want

their children to get access to the minority culture, as part of their mixed identity. Competence in the minority language may help them to achieve these goals. On the other hand, professionals, policymakers and members of the dominant language community are prone to focus on practical issues like mutual intelligibility, academic success and smooth integration in the host country. We believe it is the task of an ICC expert to take into account the concerns and the wishes of both parties and, most important, to make them explicit in order to reach understanding and collaboration.

The second stage of our study consisted in re-phrasing our clients' questions into clear research questions. In this specific case we followed the steps reported here:

a. Identification of the problem:

Clients worry about their children's language development, more specifically, about confusion in production of speech and delay in the acquisition process.

b. Identification of the symptoms:

Code switching, which may indicate confusion and an inability to learn two languages properly (hence, delay compared to monolingual peers).

c. (More precise) question: is code switching a symptom of erroneous use of the languages and/or of lack of competence?

This stage was a crucial part of the consultancy. The consultant needs academic skills to pin down the clients' questions, since this topic concerns children's welfare and it may be quite emotional for parents to deal with it. The consultant needs a sound background in language development and language use, as it will be his or her unique task to integrate information from different relevant areas of bilingual acquisition research and provide the clients with a complete picture of the situation. We examined parents' reports and made an inventory of their concerns, such as "*My child mixes up the two languages, makes up words using the grammar of both languages*". We first tried to determine the common denominator of these complaints and we identified code switching as the clearest symptom. Code switching is normally considered an indicator of poor language proficiency, despite the fact that more than four decades of linguistic research has shown that switching has a functional role and requires instead a high level of linguistic competence (Appel & Muysken, 2006). The distinction between language competence and language use brought us to the formulation of a specific research question:

Is code switching a symptom of erroneous use of the languages and/or of lack of competence?

The Research Process

The research question makes explicit the goals of this case: informing our clients about the implications of code switching for language competence and language use in young bilinguals. The information we wanted to provide is based on research and corroborated by empirical evidence. To this purpose, we conducted a literature review about code switching, specifically focusing on studies examining the use of languages (the functional aspect) and studies examining the development of two distinct grammars (the competence aspect) in young children.

First of all, we tried to determine the type of information we needed to provide a convincing answer to the research question. If code switching were the result of an erroneous use of the two languages, utterances containing code switching might be unintelligible. This does not seem to be the case. Lanza's (1997, 2001) studies on code switching in early bilinguals provide evidence for a functional use of mixing in the production of young bilingual children from the age of two. Lanza shows that children identify specific cues in the parental input that provide them with information about the linguistic preferences of their interlocutor. Thus, scientific research provides evidence for the claim that not only do young bilinguals use code switching in a functional way, they also appear to be sensitive to the properties of the input they receive and they are able to adapt their own speech to those properties.

We turned then to examining grammar development in young bilinguals. If code switching were an indicator of poor linguistic competence, bilingual speech would show violations of sentence grammar and grammar development would be seriously delayed in these children. However, as argued by Werker and Byers-Heinlein (2008), bilingual language development is typically within the monolingual range for most aspects. Meisel (2001), among others, shows that by the time they acquire syntactic structure (around the age of two), bilinguals know the word order patterns available in the languages they speak and do not mix them up. Particularly revealing in this respect are MacSwan's (2000) and Cantone's (2007) studies which systematically analyse the structure of young bilinguals' mixed utterances and show that they all obey sentence structure rules.

This brief literature review supports the claim that code switching in young bilinguals is not to be seen as symptomatic of a lack of language competence or of poor understanding of language use. In other words, code switching is a familiar feature in bilingual speech and it reveals good language competence and high sensitivity for language variation and language use.

Consultancy and Acceptance

The advice of an intercultural communication expert does a number of things:

- It fits the profile of the audience (in terms of level of education and in terms of socio-economic status)
- It gives a clear analysis of the problem, identifying a number of issues and their relevance to the situation as a whole
- It provides an answer based on research
- It makes explicit different parties' expectations
- It informs, but it does not prescribe
- It attempts to combine insights from different research areas

Questions of the kind discussed earlier are very common among bilinguals and people are eager to share their (positive or negative) experiences on raising children bilingually. We decided that our advice could be best given in the form of a workshop consisting of three parts: a general part in which we discuss parents' questions on a specific topic and for which we provide evidence-based research; a discussion session during which the audience is divided into subgroups and discusses specific themes; and finally a short plenary session in which we report the main findings and are available for questions. At all stages, the advisory role of the intercultural expert requires integration of research-based information on language acquisition with knowledge of cultural diversity. We started providing workshops in 2010 and since then the many participants have appreciated the information we provide. Every year newcomers join our mailing list and register for activities. A survey we have recently run among the participants of one of our workshops resulted in a positive evaluation of the programme (Blom, 2015). However, Blom also made a few recommendations. The one that struck us most was the request for more depth and details in the linguistic issues we present.

Final Reflection

We believe it is the prerogative of an intercultural communication expert to provide advice on intercultural matters combining linguistic expertise with social and culture-specific aspects like background, norms and values and linguistic and cultural identity of the people involved. In the above case linguistic competence occupies a central position. However, it would be short-sighted not to consider other aspects of the problem, like the clients' profile or their motivation for maintaining their mother tongue. The unique task of

an intercultural communication expert is to use insights from research to tackle real-life issues in intercultural communication.

Note

- 1 In 2010 Ivana Brasileiro, Manuela Pinto, and Sharon Unsworth initiated a number of activities aimed to raise awareness and understanding about bilingual education. Since then, they have provided a number of workshops on growing up with two or more languages and created a digital platform offering research based information on many topics involving bilingualism.

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