



Dispelling Myths of Bilingualism

Deborah Jill Chitester challenges accepted myths about bilingualism and explains how appropriate training can reduce the risk of misdiagnosis of speech disorders

Thanks to my background of years

practicing as a professional bilingual bicultural speech pathologist, I am in a unique position to comment about childhood bilingualism, debunk myths, and disseminate reliable information about this misunderstood phenomenon.

For as long as I have been working with bilingual and second language children, I have been asked about whether a child is confused due to learning two languages and if this learning of two languages can cause a language delay? The answer is generally not. To answer this comprehensively, the myths of bilingualism need to be explored and dismantled. Bilingualism is a very misunderstood phenomenon. It is also a phenomenon that is surrounded in much controversy. To this end, parents of children who are learning two languages frequently wonder if their children are delayed or are experiencing the typical issues

associated with the learning of two languages. In reality, very few professionals have the background, knowledge, and training to accurately respond to their concerns.

Training in second language acquisition and bilingualism needs to be made a top priority for educators rather than concentrated in the hands of a few. Only recently has it received the attention that it truly deserves. Still, many administrators and other educators are realizing that it needs to be made a top training priority to help address the achievement gap between culturally and linguistically diverse children and English speaking children.

Training for educators and administrators on how to educationally support these youngsters needs to be made an achievable goal in many states across this country. Slowly but surely it is occurring; but it remains a slow process.

Bilingualism is quite a misunderstood phenomenon. In fact, there still remain those who believe that it can cause retardation or other learning problems. Others believe it hinders the learning process and causes “language confusion.” In my own professional practice where I have worked with hundreds of dual and second language children over the years, many parents have asked me if they should delay their children learning more than one language as it is thought this will predispose the child to becoming language delayed. To add fuel to the fire, there is heated political controversy surrounding bilingualism which I have found is largely based on the perception that bilingual education has failed miserably. What is not taken into account is the fact that some models of bilingual education in American schools have been executed properly while others have not. This may mean the

particular model of bilingual education was not supported by the administration in the school, or languages were used too randomly during instruction. Often, it means there was not sufficient funding to support the bilingual program adequately.

This, of course often affects parental as well as administrative perceptions of bilingualism as well as actual tangible educational outcomes. In recent years, I have found this to be a major concern of parents who might have otherwise placed their children into what they perceive to be a well run bilingual program without too much question. Well run bilingual programs are difficult to run — remember, a dual language program that encompasses and encourages development of both languages is optimal. Despite this, there are very few programs fitting this description. Good bilingual programs are run with an underlying methodology that is consistent with the proliferation of a healthy model of bilingualism by taking into account that kind of language stimulation and bombardment which is consistent with the development of bilingualism. There must be sufficient bombardment and exposure to both languages with rich models for bilingualism to be optimally facilitated. There has been an increase in the amount of interest in dual language programs from families who have a first language other than English and who desire an environment where bilingualism can become a reality.

Additionally, there has been an increase in the demand for bilingual playgroups wherein children are surrounded and immersed in a language-enriched, play-based environment where optimal language learning may occur.

As play is a child's primary learning medium and tool, it is typically an advocated approach when fostering and facilitating the development of any language system. To that end, bilingual play groups are now increasingly common and have become a means of promoting childhood bilingualism successfully with children as young as 12 months of age. There are parents who have asked me if watching TV shows like *Dora the Explorer* and *Diego* is enough to foster bilingual skills through the auditory exposure to the Spanish language. The answer is that it is not sufficient since learning language requires repetition and allowances for mistakes and proper and accurate modeling of immediate correct models for imitative purposes. In other words,

learning a language necessitates an environment that will provide the opportunity for the back and forth that is needed to learn a language. Ideally, this model should be conducted by a speaker who possesses a strong intact ability to speak the language almost flawlessly. These television programs can be helpful but do not in any way substitute for the language enrichment feature that the bilingual playgroup experience truly affords. In offering bilingual playgroups, I am a keen observer of the positive powerful effects and the strong impact of learning a second language in a play-activity environment where the opportunity for repetition is bountiful as well as consistent. That which is good for first language learning is also important and necessary for successful second language acquisition. It is critical for the bilingual play group to be premised on appropriately constructed methodologies that are consistent with those factors positively correlated with successful second language acquisition — so the internal motivation of the child is important, and the opportunity and access to the appropriate language models are critical as well. Activities that properly and appropriately expose children to the second language in a comprehensible way are absolutely critical and a fundamental part of any well constructed and planned bilingual play group. I have been running these bilingual playgroups with much success for some time using these aforementioned principles and have found there to be a high rate of successful second language learning as a result with children in the of 18 months to two and half years age group as well as those in the three-five year age bracket.

The preschool children in the groups, it should be mentioned, had not been diagnosed with any language disorders or appear to be exhibiting any characteristics of a language disorder. This is important to note as children with some degree of language disorder may have a different experience and therefore a different outcome.

Misunderstanding of what the word bilingual means contributes to the confusion as well. Often, children who are learning two languages are labeled bilingual or a child of

Hispanic origin is often inappropriately referred to as bilingual. Actually, the word "bilingual" is misused quite often.

In my experience, teachers and parents misuse the word when speaking about second language children who are in the process

of acquiring English. The process of acquiring a second language is called second language acquisition and it is quite distinct from bilingualism. This often occurs in bilingual speech language evaluations that are conducted by those without proper training. The first line will read: "This bilingual male only speaks Spanish...". Bilingual means near native communicative competence in both languages so this statement contradicts itself.

As I read on in the language evaluation, it becomes obvious that the student is a second language learner actively engaged in the process of learning another language which is clearly mutually exclusive of bilingualism. Successful second language learning indeed often culminates in a robust state of bilingualism. But a second language learner is NOT a bilingual child. This type of pattern often

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serves to indicate additionally that the individual conducting the evaluation is not properly credentialed to do so. This may mean he or she is not bilingual and thus not in a position to judge the integrity of two language systems or that he or she has not received the proper training in second language training and acquisition necessary to complete this task. Please note that both are absolutely necessary to work optimally with minority language children. Unfortunately, many of those responsible for testing dual or second language children may test in English only or use inappropriate methods of testing due to lack of training in the specialized manner in which these children should be tested. Also, if the examiner is not truly bilingual, this may have additional implications for the completeness and accuracy of testing. Inappropriate methods can range from a total reliance on standard-