

# Bilingualism guidance

## Key points

- The RCSLT is committed to supporting bilingual individuals and their families
- Bilingualism is an advantage in a person of any age
- Bilingualism is an advantage, regardless of the presence of a speech, language, or communication disorder, or feeding and swallowing difficulties
- Bilingualism does not cause, or contribute to a speech, language or communication disorder
- Working with interpreters is a core skill for SLTs, including bilingual SLTs
- Services should allocate at least double the time for bilingual clients and their families, to achieve the same positive outcomes as monolingual clients

## Page content

- Introduction
- Bilingualism – overview
- Bilingualism in the UK
- Migration in the UK
- Terminology – adults
- Terminology – children and young people
- **Language development and becoming bilingual**
- Speech, language and communication disorders in a bilingual context
  - Characteristics
  - Vulnerability and risk issues – Adult
  - Vulnerability and risk issues – Children
  - Staffing in bilingualism – all age groups
  - Staffing in bilingualism – adults
  - Staffing in bilingualism – children
  - Audit and service evaluation
  - Guidelines on assessment and management – adults
  - Guidelines on assessment and management – children

- Safeguarding, Child Protection and Vulnerable Adults in Bilingualism
- Policy UK
- Policy England
- Policy Scotland
- Policy Wales
- Policy Northern Ireland
- References

---

## Language development and becoming bilingual

### Mother tongue and home language

'Mother tongue' is a commonly used term for the language spoken as the main or first language. The term reflects the most common route of language learning, i.e. from mother to child.

Since most child-rearing involves the mother as primary carer, this term is still widely understood. 'Home language' is used throughout this guidance to avoid gender bias where the father, or other carer is involved in child-rearing.

### Routes to bilingualism

Some researchers have placed emphasis on the manner in which children have become bilingual. The following terms are widely used in the literature, and are concerned with the timing of exposure to two or more languages.

### Simultaneous bilingualism

Is two or more languages are spoken to the child, usually from birth. This is of interest to SLTs as, it is often claimed that such children have slower rates of language acquisition than monolingual children (Hoff *et al.* 2012; Hurtado *et al.*, 2008).

Simultaneous though does not mean equal amounts of exposure in each/all languages. Even with children exposed to two languages from birth, exposure may be very uneven in the two languages. Research investigating early lexical acquisition in bilingual infants has repeatedly reported a positive association between maternal talkativeness and vocabulary size (See Hoff *et al.* 2012, and Hurtado, 2008)

Meisel (2004), points out that:

'Although some researchers report that bilinguals tend to begin to speak late, i.e. after the age 2;0...the observed delays are well within the range of what counts as a normal rate of language development for monolingual children.' (95).

Inappropriate assessment can also contribute to the myth of later language development, such as if the child's words are only counted in one language and not both.

### Sequential bilingualism

Sequential or successive bilingualism is where one language is acquired and then a second (L2) or additional language introduced later.

Although this is the dominant route by which children become bilingual in the UK, relatively little research has been conducted into the experiences of these children, compared to simultaneous bilingual children (Meisel, 2004: 105). There is growing research into these children (see Chondrogianni in Miller *et al.*, 2018).

## Parental strategies

Baker (2000, xvii) identifies three types of family bilingualism:

1. Each parent speaks a different language to the child. This is often called the 'one person-one language' strategy.
2. The parents speak one language to the child who acquires a second language outside the home. This often occurs in Language minority situations.
3. Both parents speak both languages to the child.

Parents are often advised to use the 'one-person/parent one-language' approach (OPOL) to avoid the child becoming 'confused'. One parent uses one language exclusively, and the other parent another exclusively, with both languages introduced from birth.

This is based on negative views of code-switching, which was thought to be undesirable (Romaine, 1995) and evidence that the child could not differentiate his/her languages.

Research has debunked these myths. Dewaele and Li Wei (2013) found attitudes to code-switching were linked to many factors, including personality. Emotionally stable people were more positive about code-switching.

Younger age groups were not as appreciative of code-switching as older speakers; less educated people were more positive about code-switching than highly educated speakers; and those growing up in multilingual and ethnically diverse environments more positive about code-switching than those who had not.

Kabuto (2010) found that a bilingual toddler's' middle-class parents used code-switching as a tool to help children engage with:

- reading
- develop biliteracy
- language skills

The OPOL strategy has been successful with middle-class parents where, crucially, both languages are of high-status and the parents are highly motivated (Cunningham-Andersson and Andersson, 1999). However, most bilingual children in the UK speak a lower-status language at home.

Romaine (1995) highlights that:

'A very common outcome of the 'one person-one language' method was a child who could understand the languages of both parents, but spoke only the language of the community in which they lived (e.g. English)'.

This language separation approach also assumes that there are two parents, excluding single parent families.

Genesee, Nicoladis and Paradis (1995) showed that children as young as two years of age could differentiate their languages, and that parents, although they reported using one-parent one language strategy, did use code-switching with their children.

Bilingual parents may have negative beliefs about code switched sentences, and be unaware that they code switch.

However, there is no reason to separate languages in this manner, as no harmful effects have been reported from code-switching language input from parents. There is very little research on the relationship between caregiver CS and children's lexical development.

Only very few studies have explored the effect that CS might have on children's vocabulary development (Bail et al, 2015; Byers-Heinlein, 2013; Hodd *et al.* 2013; Place and Hoff, 2011).

SLTs should therefore discuss the parent(s) concerns about family strategies and reassure them that different strategies work for different families. The main consideration should be the total input time for each language, as well as the status of activities in a particular language, with avoiding language-loss in mind.

Practical methods, such as buying games; movies and TV programmes; music, and books in home language and the language of education will ensure that neither language is seen as negative.

## **Silent period on first exposure to L2**

Children who speak a home language entering education for the first time are plunged into an environment where the adults, and often other children, do not share their language. A new language (English, or sometimes Welsh or Gaelic) is the language of the classroom.

At this point, children may go through a silent period. This is pragmatically appropriate, as the adults that the child is encountering often do not share their home language.

Children realise that communication in home language is not possible, and begin the process of second language or additional language acquisition. The silent period is, therefore, an entirely normal stage in second language acquisition.

The challenges for the SLT are:

1. How long is the silent period 'typical', before we should be concerned about the child's communication skills?
2. Do we need to do anything proactive during the silent period to facilitate communication?
3. How can the silent period be differentiated from Selective mutism?

The literature suggests if the silent period lasts longer than one month, then there should be concern. However, Bligh (2014) found that a small but significant proportion of children experienced a silent period of six months, and sometimes a year (3).

Others have highlighted that selective mutism is more prevalent in bilingual children. Certain factors may contribute to selective mutism in children exposed to a new language, including:

- a social anxiety disposition
- family immigration status
- developmental delay.

(Toppelberg et al, 2005).

Children who have a prolonged silent period of over a month should, therefore, be assessed for these risk factors and monitored. If active management is not implemented, children with serious language disorder or selective mutism may be missed.

### **Language-loss**

'Language loss' or 'Language attrition' '...is a phenomenon where an individual's abilities (usually measured expressively) in his or her L1 are diminished, presenting patterns of production that do not correspond to a typical monolingual speaker of the target language' (Anderson, 1999).

Children from minority groups, especially where the home language is considered low-status are particularly vulnerable. Patterns of loss reported in the literature, include the following four:

- Progressive reduction of inflectional morphology, with a corresponding less flexible word order
- Leveling of grammatical distinctions, so that irregular patterns become regularized
- Preference for coordinated sentences, with a corresponding reduction in embedding; and
- Transfer of L2 syntactic structure to L1

(Anderson, 1999).

It is possible that language loss may be confused with developmental language disorder (DLD).

### **Avoiding language-loss**

Language loss can be rapid in both individuals (occurring within a few months) and in a particular language community, with a shift from L1 to English in as little as one generation (Anderson, 2001).

This tends to occur when children speaking a home language with a perceived low-status is in contact with a high-status language, e.g. Mirpuri speaking children entering an English medium school setting.

This may have a profound impact on the family, with the child speaking English to a parent who cannot understand the language sufficiently to communicate and maintain strong parent-child bonds. Parent(s)/carers should, therefore, be supported to insist on home language use, until the child settles into a bilingual usage pattern.

Teachers should be encouraged to:

‘... promote additive bilingualism over subtractive, multiculturalism over assimilation in their classrooms by providing multicultural students’ a welcoming environment, and helping them in expressing and overcoming their feelings of anomie, acculturation and assimilation’ (Unganer, 2014).

Smith-Christmas (2016) also highlights that:

‘Perhaps not surprisingly, children who receive more minority language input tend to be more productive bilinguals than children who receive less minority language input’ (3).

SLTs should explain to parent(s)/carers that abandoning home language is an irreversible step, and children cannot acquire the home language without sufficient exposure.

Parents may be disappointed when, having opted for English (or language of education), the child goes on to lose their home language, and then later need to learn their home language as an additional language. This may lead to reduced mastery of their home language.

Parents often express dissatisfaction at the competence and phonological accuracy of such language use. It is best to ensure that potentially bilingual children retain both languages primarily.

One way to present this to parents is to ask if the child should be monolingual or bilingual when they are an adult. Most parents opt for bilingualism. This focus on outcomes is far more helpful than thinking about English for educational purposes.

It is important to note that language loss may occur to the L1 or L2 depending on the amount of input a child receives. Flores (2015) reported the case of a nine year old bilingual child losing L2 German, when returning to Portugal.

Loss was extremely rapid, with significant difficulties with German after only a few months, and the child not even able to remember common German words such as ‘house’ after 18 months.

Flores concludes that ‘...bilingual children need uninterrupted exposure to both languages in order to retain their bilingual competence.’ (587).

### **Differentiating language loss from language disorder**

The patterns of language loss are strikingly similar to DLD. The key to differentiating language loss from language disorder is the exposure the child has to their home and additional languages.

If home language input has been reduced (e.g. because the child has started school and is using English, setting up a cycle of parents and siblings switching to English), then home language will be lost within months.

Restoring sufficient exposure to both/all languages should resolve the language loss, whereas DLD will not spontaneously resolve in this case.

## Ethnicity and bilingualism

Stow and Dodd (2003) highlight that there are complex issues associated with ethnicity and language use, as well as cultural identity. These areas not always overlap, and terminology may be problematic for a range of reasons.

'White' (a census term), does not, for example, differentiate between:

- monolingual English speakers
- traveller communities
- different religious groups
- bilinguals who may speak a European language.

Assumptions that a white family are monolingual risks missing bilingual children, and all families should be asked if they speak another language during the parent/carer interview, following referral (case history).

The [2011 Census](#) only asked respondents what their *main* language was. This may mask many speakers who use English for work and education, but use a home language regularly as well.

Stow and Dodd (2005) found that 'Only 45% of bilingual children had their language correctly recorded on the referral form.' (10).

It appears that families may accept a language with a well-known label. For example, Pakistani heritage families may agree that they speak Urdu or Punjabi, when they actually speak Mirpuri.

Mirpuri is often labelled as 'Pakistani Pahari' or 'Potwari', and this language is widely spoken in the UK, with over half living in Birmingham (Office for National Statistics, 2013),

To avoid mis-reporting of languages, SLTs should be familiar with local dialects and languages used in their area. Families should be offered a choice of language, for example:

- 'Which languages do you speak at home?
- Do you speak Mirpuri, Potwari, Pahari or Punjabi?
- Or another language?'; rather than being asked
- 'Do you speak X?'

Telephone triage can also assist in the identification of the correct language.

## Refugees, asylum seekers, Immigrants and Multicultural communities

A refugee is a person fleeing conflict or persecution (UNHCR, 2017).

Refugees may apply for asylum in the UK. Such an application is legitimate under international law, and if granted, asylum seekers become legal citizens of the UK.

Such individuals are likely to have had little time to adjust to British society and may have had little or no opportunity to learn sufficient English. Many refugees are traumatised by their journey to the UK.

Finney and Peach (2004) note that:

‘The media, particularly the press, in the UK has covered asylum issues in a hostile and inaccurate way’ (79) and that ‘there is a great deal of concern and hostility towards incomers’ (28).

Working with interpreters may bring additional challenges when working with asylum seekers. Vostanis (2017) reminds us that:

‘interpreters coming from the same community, often being refugees themselves, thus both being important role models and functioning outside their health or social professional remit; these boundaries need to be clear and monitored’ (74).

In other words, SLTs need to be extra vigilant to ensure that untrained or partially trained interpreters are supported, and that any disclosures from a child or young person are dealt with appropriately.

There is also some risk that interpreters do not understand the concept of confidentiality, or families may feel extremely vulnerable, especially when a very small community exists.

Discussing confidentiality together with the client and interpreter and clarifying the consequences of ignoring confidentiality may be necessary to establish trust with the family.

An immigrant is a person who has moved to another country to take up permanent residence, usually for reasons of employment, education or family connection. While they also:

- have legitimate status in the UK
- are people who have moved to the UK but do not have the relevant government authorisation and accompanying documentation

Multicultural communities include all the above, but the majority of people with a cultural heritage, not exclusively British, are UK citizens due to being born in this country. This is why Britain is often referred to as a multicultural society. British citizens speak many languages, have different religions and cultural practices.

The term ‘Heritage’ may be applied to a person who is British, but has roots to another country or culture.

For example, a Pakistani Heritage child would be a British citizen whose parent(s), or grandparent(s), or even great-great grandparent(s) originated from Pakistan. Such communities often have strong cultural, religious and linguistic ties with the Heritage country, and may visit relatives there.

Language is a vital component of the transmission of culture. Without an understanding of home language, children and young people may have difficulty understanding the nuances of concepts, beliefs and ideas associated with a particular culture.



Pahl (2015) highlights that 'Notions of place and space are disrupted when possessions are left behind, and language is all there is left to recreate lost objects in old spaces...Home cultures can be understood in this context as "traveling" (304).