

## THE EFFECT OF GROWING UP MULTILINGUAL (Het effect van meertalig opgroeien)

### Fears & Concerns and Benefits of bi/multi-lingualism

- Fears/concerns
  - Fears of handicap to child's speech development, intellectual progress, educational chances, emotional stability, character difficulties etc (Research and experience shows these fears are clearly unfounded!)
  - Fears about bilingualism come from the perspective that unilingualism is the 'norm' and therefore bilingualism is somehow more complex or difficult. But if it is seen as normal and positive then we have less fear
  - Often parents or other adults transfer their own difficulties with language onto children (or their own adapting issues) Or see them struggling and choose to pull them out rather than offer additional support and persevere.
  - parents sometimes feel guilty about taking their children into a new language environment: "What have I done to my child?"
  - "Nowhere in the specialist literature are any grounds for fears on this count to be found **as long as the family background is stable, relaxed and positive towards the languages involved.**"
  - Parents can fear that their child will not have a strong adherence to one culture – bilingual children generally show a far greater tolerance/understanding of other cultures and less stereotyping
  - children will sometimes have a stronger linguistic & cultural allegiance to the 'other' language - this can be seen as negative by the parents so long as the home language is continued to be used and **valued** children will likely grow up valuing both but this may be a choice that we need to allow our children to make.
- Benefits/Advantages
  - Cognitive Benefits (thinking/mental processes) – cognitive flexibility, creative thinking, spatial control tasks, more divergent learners, enhanced problem solving & analytical skills.
  - Character Advantages – increased flexibility & adaptability, less stereotyping & more cultural (& social) awareness, enhances social & interpersonal skills, increased self-esteem
  - Curriculum benefits – learn other languages more quickly, transfer of academic skills between languages, further educational opportunities in either language
  - Communicative advantages – can read, write and communicate in other languages – therefore read plays, novels, poetry etc , can communicate with wider range of people (esp if English)
  - Cultural advantages – understanding language gives understanding of culture therefore more open to cultural differences. More tolerant and less stereotyping
  - Employment benefits – potential wider choice of jobs in variety of fields/countries. (TCK's experiences also benefit them in being good cultural agents for future employers)

## **Second language acquisition**

### \* Bilingual from birth

- acquisition is just like two first languages.
- Should be done with care and consistency – eg 1 parent/1 lang or specific situations
- Will need to reinforce the ‘minority’ language – that not spoken in community.

### \* Second language acquisition at a later stage:

- Very different process from FLA but the younger the child the more similar the processes can be – if immersed in L2 from quite young age (eg day care/ nanny) then will ‘pick-up’ L2 much like L1 – however it still can be stressful (unlike FLA) and it will be lost almost immediately on removal from situation

- L2 acquisition different from L1 in lack of uniformity – it is affected by factors such as individual cognitive ability, motivation, social status, fear and knowledge of L1 (contains universal properties of language).

\* Critical period – many believed that there was a ‘critical period’ for learning language and that after this period (usually believed to be around puberty) then language acquisition was much more difficult and probably impossible to become ‘native-like’.

- Recent studies have shown that this may not be the case:

Contrary to popular belief adults proceed through certain language learning stages faster than children and older children acquire a second language faster than younger children.

- Snow & Hoefnagel<sup>1</sup> studied people learning Dutch (3-5, 6-7, 8-10, 12-15, and adults) While younger groups showed better results on pronunciation it was actually the 12-15 year olds that showed the fastest L2 acquisition and 3-5 showed worst.

- Possible reasons: ‘transference of skills’ for older students – younger ones are still acquiring first language; higher motivation to learn in older group and better cognitive skills to apply to learning process.

However, for long-term (‘native-like’ proficiency) - the younger the better in terms of starting language learning.

Importance of this study is:

1. Do not overestimate the ‘ease’ with which younger students will learn – children do not pick-up language effortlessly (esp in early primary school ages – still struggling with L1)

2. It is not too late for older students to learn – given good support and a good learning environment

## **Language learning and educational issues**

Language Learning and Educational issues:

a) Question one – where do I expect my child to continue their education?

2) How will language learning impact academic development?

a) Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) vs Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) (conversational vs academic language). BICS in 1-2 years give

impression of fluency but CALP takes 5-7 years and is necessary for academic achievement

- b) This concept is also important for returning children – they may end up with BICS in L1 and CALP in L2 therefore very difficult to continue schooling in home country
  - c) Need for academic talk – reading, writing but also talking about text in L1 or L2 (as needed)
- 3) How long does it take to learn a language?
- a) need to understand the length of time needed for academic language & therefore academic achievement (5+ years)
  - b) Need to balance the benefits (if short term then benefits will be minimal) against the discomfort and possible trauma child may experience.
  - c) If you only plan to be on field for 2-3 years then need to seriously consider the implications – lack of academic progress – for child if put into fully L2 schooling. If plan is to continue in that schooling system then putting them in younger the better.
- 4) What kind of instruction is necessary for effective language learning?
- a) Obviously quality instruction! But this is not always available or new missionaries feel unable to be critical or demanding
  - b) In local school children need L1 support, should not be required to do same tests as native speakers, need a “silent period” (no speaking required), teaching with diagrams, visuals etc.
  - c) Language learning is never easy but should not be painful or humiliating and should be enjoyable.
  - d) Adults have intrinsic motivation which carries them through disappointments but children can stop learning and begin to dislike language and culture if language learning environment is too difficult.
- 5) How will the language learning affect my child emotionally?
- a) For children language learning is not an academic endeavour (effort) but a social one – for children loneliness and fear of not making friends is uppermost in their minds
  - b) Seen as a social endeavour means that language learning will be closely linked to their self-esteem and therefore their emotional well being
  - c) Effects their sense of self because they cannot represent themselves fully in the foreign language.
  - d) Also beware of making children too busy (school, learning one or two new languages etc). They need time to play and have unstructured time otherwise they too can face emotional burnout

### **Two further points:**

1. Continuing to use mother tongue at home does NOT disadvantage children learning L2 and in fact advantages. Mistaken belief (often from schools) that we need to abandon the home language and increase school language as quickly as possible – in fact the opposite may be true – children continue to feel affirmed, understood and stable. They continue to grow vocabulary that they can then transfer to L2 etc. Forcing a change leads to further stress (all day not just at school!) and a stressful/unnatural home environment which is not conducive to learning.

2. Children often considered to have learning difficulties instead of seeing them specifically as language difficulties especially when children as ‘fluent’ (BICS)

### **Case study**

The Jansen family have just arrived on the field from The Netherlands with two children – one in Year 1 and the other in Year 2 of high school. Their children already speak some English and the family wants to put them in the local international school. However, the school warns that the children might be at risk of graduating without either sufficient English or sufficient Dutch to do university level work. The Jansens wonder how their children can learn English and the local language, while still maintaining their Dutch language skills.

- Need to carefully consider if their children have enough English skills (try to get good testing from school to assess levels)
- If not may want to consider homeschooling – with elective programs at school
- If they choose the school option they need to make sure children have good support (hiring tutors)
- May be better not to make demands regarding L3 (local language) while students are working so hard on English
- Will need to supplement with academic Dutch by reading, writing and talking. Possibly online courses

### **Task: Write a document with guiding principles (regarding language learning & educational options) for missionaries with children going out from your church/mission organisation**

Most missions recognise the diversity that exists in the mission community and in missionaries' situations so no longer put forward universally applicable requirements where language and MK education are concerned. But in the absence of hard & fast policies, both families and organizations need a foundation of knowledge about language acquisition and its relationship to academic learning. Parents need help to know the right questions to ask of the range of options available.

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<sup>i</sup> Catherine E. Snow and Marian Hoefnagel-Hohle, "The Critical Period for Language Acquisition: Evidence from Second Language Learning" in *Child Development*, 1978, 49, 1114-1128.