

Exploration on Way out of Achieving Chinese-English Bilingualism from Early Childhood in China

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Abstract: Worldwide, there has been a number of researchers studying how children acquire two or more languages since bilingualism or multilingualism were increasingly prevalent. China, a monolingual culture is a late participant engaged in the field of bilingualism studies. Recent years witnessed a growing number of Chinese parents who attempted to raise their children bilingual by speaking English to them at home, however, relevant research on bilingualism acquisition in China lagged behind. This article reviews existing studies on early child bilingualism acquisition and bilingual parenting, displays language context in China, and explores solutions to difficulties Chinese parents face. Different from their counterparts in culturally diverse context, these Chinese parents living in a monolingual environment were confronted with unique and more challenges: the quality of English they speak as a second language to children; the quantity of English input; the monolingual environment in China; and resistance to English by children. Solutions are proposed to tackle these issues respectively.

Keywords: Childhood bilingualism; Bilingual parenting; Bilingualism acquisition; Bilingual education; Language context

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1 Introduction

Bilingualism refers to the competence in two languages to different degrees. Extensive research has confirmed that children, since they were born, exposed to two

languages acquire two phonologic systems, grammatical patterns and vocabularies^[1]. In opposite to worries that early dual language exposure does damage to infants' brain or causes confusion in their language development, evidence shows that childhood bilingualism leads to advantages in metalinguistic awareness, neurocognitive ability and executive functioning^[2, 3] (Poulin-Dubois, Blaye, Coutya, & Bialystok, 2011). Given the various edges of mastering two languages, a growing number of parents embark on the path of bilingual parenting. Numerous studies have been conducted worldwide to analyze the development of bilinguals from infancy^[2-6].

In developing bilingualism two systems are adopted: simultaneous acquisition and sequential acquisition. Simultaneous acquisition takes place when a child is exposed to two languages at the same time and acquire them as a single language^[4]. By contrast, sequential acquisition occurs when a second language is learned after the acquisition of first one^[7]. Among a variety of bilingual raising models, the one-person-one-language (OPOL) strategy stands out. OPOL strategy advocates that at least one family member speaks the less used language at home^[5]. Adhering to one model is crucial in bilingual raising, yet it is easier said than done. Major difficulties standing in the way include but not restricted to: (1) the widespread fears that bilingualism may lead to inadequate practice of both language and thus resulting in poor command of both languages^[6]; (2) lacking of input in the less used language, especially after children acquiring the major language; (3) children may be unwilling to speak the minority language in a monolingual culture^[5].

Research about early bilingualism was mostly carried out in culturally diverse countries such as the United States and Canada, while far less seen in China. Over

the past decades, limited number of scholars examined the feasibility of achieving childhood bilingualism in China^[8, 9] in addition to a handful of case studies on Chinese-English bilingual parenting^[10-12]. In stark contrast to the scarcity of relevant research is the upsurge of early childhood English education in China. Today, a growing number of well-educated Chinese parents attempt to raise their infants bilingual. Given the monolingual environment in China, however, they have to create an “artificial” bilingual environment at home. Different from the binational families in which each parent speaks their mother tongue to the children, these Chinese couples choose to speak their second language, English, to their children in daily communication. Such addictive bilingualism is even more challenging and under-researched. Upon such a backdrop, this study aims to analyze the obstacles of bilingual parenting in China, explore strategies based on international research to overcome them, and shed new light on achieving childhood bilingualism in China.

2 The language context of China

China is a multinational country with Han people as its largest ethnic group. Among a variety of languages and dialects spoken in China, the Standard Mandarin (the language of Han) was defined as official language. Despite the increasing emphasis placed on English for entrance to higher education, most students, after years of English learning, still find their English proficiency barely allows them to communicate with native English speakers. Without much opportunity to put it into practice, the English education in China is largely exam-oriented. Such an education system cultivated batches of students who are good at analyzing grammar and memorizing vocabulary for higher scores in exam, but seldom use them in day-to-day life.

As China became more integrated with the world, the last decades have witnessed an explosive expansion in the number of people with overseas experience. Benefited from the competence in English, they are eager to pass that edge on to their next generation. With good command of English, they can hardly be satisfied by the quality of myriad English courses for children in the market. Rather, they strive to turn their home into the immersive English learning environment where children pick up the language naturally. An array of English picture books, flash cards, smart early education robots spring up, catering for the needs of bilingual early education. Furthermore, some parents pioneer

to launch classes or books to share their experience in bilingual parenting, helping others to provide language enrichment activities for their children.

3 Difficulties

While the competence in two languages may naturally occur, not every child exposed to two languages grow into bilinguals. Even in the United States, successful examples of bilingual-raising has been a rarity^[13]. In China, even daunting obstacles hinder many parents who would have the chance to practice bilingual parenting from putting it into action. Under the context mentioned above, the most common difficulties in Chinese bilingual family are characterized in this section.

3.1 Quality of Input

The vast majority of Chinese acquired English as the second language after seven years old, when the critical period of language learning^[14] has passed, which means, there is a gap between their English and Chinese proficiency. They may be English teachers, who is fluent in class; interpreters, who switch back and forth between English and Chinese; or employees in American enterprises who talk freely with their American colleagues. But to speak in English entirely at home, for them, is overwhelming. They worry about their accent, grammar mistakes, encounter of gadgets that they don't know name in English, etc. The incompetence of using English as skillful as their native language is a big concern when it comes to educate their children in English.

3.2 Quantity of Input

Two working parents seeking help from their extended family for babysitting is the most common portrayal of Chinese dual-income family. Exclude the time spent at workplace, on rest, there are not many hours left for interactions between parents and children every day, let alone the exceptional busy period when parents work overtime. Under such circumstances, speaking a second language to their children consistently after a long day is indeed a daunting agenda, requiring enormous enthusiasm and extraordinary perseverance.

In addition, the members of extended family who help taking care of children normally don't speak English. Sometimes conversation takes place at home is supposed to include these family members, slashing the input of English further. The inconvenience of

switching language constantly discourages many parents.

3.3 Monolingual Environment

Considering that the decisive factor for the success of achieving bilingualism is establishing and securing the minority language^[15], environment plays a critical role in inviting children to speak in English. While parents can manage to create a micro bilingual environment for their children at home, outside the door, the monolingual macro environment would not provide much opportunity to reinforce English skills these children attained.

Even though recent years witnessed the flourishing of bilingual kindergartens, when it comes to aggregates, they fail to make a difference. Moreover, notwithstanding their questionable quality, these kindergartens charge staggeringly high. Except for a minority of wealthy families that can afford elite kindergartens, most children have no access to this kind of reliable bilingual microenvironment.

3.4 Reluctant Children

Not uncommon is the situation where a Chinese mother speaks English to her child, only to find the child turned back. The more fluent children are at the majority language, the less likely they speak the minority language. Even responding their parents in English at home is reserved, to say nothing of using English voluntarily out of home. Young children are not supposed to take the blame for not as ambitious as their parents. They need to reach a comfort level in a language before feel willing to use it^[15]. In the Chinese-speaking environment where sustained English exposure is not guaranteed, infants can hardly develop a proficiency that allows them to talk freely when they grow older, leading to less use in English. And less use in return leads to less proficiency. Failed in breaking the cycle, many people witness their effort on bilingual parenting go to waste and their children end up as monolinguals. Such a scene discourages many parents in attempting to cultivate their children bilingually.

4 Solutions

To address the issues proposed above, the following tactics are advised.

For the concerns of their flawed English, parents, in the first place, should be aware of the fact that choosing bilateral parenting means to be lifelong learners.

Growing children's functional competence in English is rather a process of learning English together with them than that of teaching them. Since infants are born, parents have chance to improve their English every day at each stage of infants' language development. Deeming bilingual parenting as an opportunity of self-enhancement instead of sacrifice for children increases parents' motivation. In addition, as children raised by parents whose Mandarin is not standard enough speak standard Mandarin and are able to correct mistakes made by their parents, with proper education, children will not be affected by the flaw in their parents' English. Moreover, in the interactions with infants, people mainly use the infant-directed speech, in which grammar is simplified and phrases repeated^[16]. Mistakes rarely happen under the circumstances.

While input plays a crucial role in achieve bilingualism, there is no necessary correlation between amount of exposure and amount of learning^[15]. Rather, there exists a certain point after which more exposure does not matter^[15]. Now that ensuring Chinese infants as much English exposure as American infants is unnecessary as well as unrealistic, efforts should be made to increase efficiency of English exposure. For instance, English songs, cartoon and etc. are at parents' disposal to spark the interest of infants so that they could pay attention when parents are speaking English to them.

Furthermore, developing literacy in English compensate the lack of English input. Apart from exposing children to verbal English, teaching them to read and form the habit of reading are equally important. Once they are literate, they obtain large vocabulary and various sentence patterns through extensive reading, developing their language intuition.

To tackle children's resistance to English, parents are supposed to choose one bilingual raising model and adhere to it at the outset. Whether its aforementioned OPOL or Minority Language at Home (MLH), following through the principle is where the key lies on. Language of infants starts at home, with the people around them. Sticking to a specific model facilitates children to understand in which language they are expected to speak on various occasions. Once children figure out who speaks which language at home, they talk to family members in corresponding language, forming it a habit.

Attitude of children can affect the efficiency of bilingual cultivation, attitude of parents, meanwhile,

also makes a difference. Values can be added to a language when parents or peers show positive view toward it^[15]. Hence, children are prone to use English more frequently when they find the language is of great importance to the job of their parents. In spite of the monolingual situation in China, there developed an English mania. Being able to speak English in daily communication, especially at a young age is considered a stepping stone to success. Such an English-favored society invites children to speak in English.

To compensate the lack of English-speaking environment, parents can garner support from their English-speaking friends, colleagues, even strangers, and other resources within their reach by taking children to friends, to workplace, to a café where many American teachers usually spend time on festivals such as Thanksgiving or Christmas, and to English-speaking countries on holidays. In addition, as the product of globalization, English words everywhere can be made good use of. From the packaging of tissue, lotion and biscuits to public notice and signs on subway, elevator and advertising board, English words are printed right after Chinese characters, which can serve as reinforcer of bilingual cultivation. Government and the whole society, on the other hand, can help to create a more favorable environment for English learning such as further regulate the translation market to guarantee the accuracy of translation of public signs and broadcast announcement.

5 Conclusion

In view of bilingual education is an irresistible trend, and scientific studies have manifested that the sooner to start it, the better, raising children bilingually is highly advisable. Daunting an agenda as it is to create an artificial bilingual environment at home, speaking English to children is a rewarding experience for not only the children but also the parents. Determined to be a lifelong learner and grow with their children together, parents have a range of strategies at their disposal such as diversified English input (English songs, videos, games, cartoons and storybooks), OPOL model, English-favoring attitude, and backup from English-speaking friends.

Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest was reported by all authors.

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