Successfully Raising Bilingual Children: An Analysis of Methods Used by Parents in the Fostering of Child Bilingualism

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Declaration

This project has not been submitted to any other university. The work presented is my own, except where the work of others has been referenced. I hereby give permission for this report to be copied or lent to the library for academic purposes.

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Abstract

This project provides an analysis of the methods used by parents in the fostering of bilingualism in their children with an aim to identifying key factors in bilingual acquisition. The various definitions and descriptions of bilingualism are first examined and the different types of bilingual individuals and typical patterns of bilingual acquisition are outlined. The most common strategies employed for fostering bilingualism are examined along with the analysis of five case studies of bilingual children. This study will conclude that although the strategy employed for successfully fostering bilingualism in children is highly dependent on individual circumstances, the most influential factors for the fostering of bilingualism in children are positive societal attitudes, habit formation through consistency and sufficient language exposure by means of human interaction and rich linguistic stimuli.
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1 Introduction

The term bilingualism or multilingualism can refer to linguistic phenomena regarding an individual speaker who uses two or more languages, a community of speakers where two or more languages are used, or between speakers of different languages. Romaine (1995) notes that there ‘are about thirty times as many languages as there are countries’ and that ‘this entails the presence of bilingualism in practically every country of the world.’ In today’s modern society where globalisation manifests itself in matters regarding economics, politics, culture and travel, it is inevitable that knowing a second language is seen as being advantageous to an individual and the growing interest of the raising of bilingual children is reflected in the growing number of family networking groups dedicated to the those interested in introducing bilingualism into their families and lives. This paper investigates bilingualism regarding an individual speaker, specifically the active raising of bilingual children from birth or infancy onwards. The various reasons of the parent(s) for choosing to raise their children bilingually will be investigated and the primary methods that they employ and their reasons for choosing a certain strategy will be thoroughly examined with an aim for a better understanding of child bilingual acquisition. Essentially, the aim for this project is to discover what are the most appropriate and practical methods employed to foster and maintain bilingualism in children and which are the most influential factors involved in bilingual development. For this project, I have also drawn upon five case studies of families who are actively fostering bilingualism, in particular where there is at least one parent communicating with the child in his/her non-native language.

The study of bilingualism has until recent years been largely neglected and books and papers which have been published on the subject have often addressed bilingualism from a monolingual’s point of view or in the interests of second language teaching. Indeed the attitudes towards bilingualism have changed rapidly in recent years. The study of language with a preoccupation in dealing with analytical problems has been carried out in general from a monolingual perspective. In this respect, Jakobson (1953) observes that ‘bilingualism is for [him] the fundamental problem of linguistics’. I, being bilingual myself (in Cantonese-Chinese and English) have
always taken an interest in bilingual studies and so in this paper I approach the subject matter from a bilingual perspective and use anecdotal evidence and empirical data from my own bilingual experience as well as the case studies I have conducted to illustrate some examples of linguistic phenomena that arise in bilingualism.

2 Preliminaries

The first and foremost issue that needed to be dealt with was the very definition and description of bilingualism. There are clearly many various definitions of the term and indeed the very notion of who was considered bilingual and who was not differs from linguist to linguist and from parent to parent. Thus in chapter three it is necessary to discuss the various different terminology used in the field of linguistics concerning bilingualism and provide some definitions of bilingualism by various authors on the subject as well as provide an outline of the main contributing factors associated with defining and describing bilingualism. As I was primarily interested in highlighting issues surrounding bilingualism from a parent’s perspective, in chapter four, we discuss matters surrounding who is bilingual, various types of bilinguals and how a child becomes bilingual. Chapter five presents the reasons given by parents for choosing to raise their children bilingually and we take a look at the concerns and problems parents face before choosing to raise bilingual children. In chapter six we discuss the various methods and strategies parents adopt to ‘successfully’ raise their children bilingually and the advantages and disadvantages of adopting these methods. Chapter seven addresses the issues of main concern for parents and which are also the current topics of heated debate within the study of linguistics – early vs. late bilingualism and the issue of language mixing.

3 Describing and defining bilingualism

3.1 Bilingualism, multilingualism, plurilingualism and other terms

Within the field of linguistics, it is clear that there does not seem to be a universally agreed definition of bilingualism. Indeed the opinion of who is bilingual and who is
not varies from person to person, researcher to researcher. Is a bilingual someone who is completely fluent in more than one language? And if this is the criterion, then how do we go about measuring linguistic ability? The terms multilingualism and plurilingualism have also been used interchangeably with the term bilingualism, though this difference refers to the number of languages involved. These three terms when used interchangeably all refer to the use of two or more languages but when used contrastively bilingualism refers to the use of exactly two languages and multilingualism and plurilingualism refer to the use of more than two languages. In some areas the terms trilingualism and quadrilingualism etc. have also been used though generally as a quantitative term in more specialist studies and not used interchangeably with multilingualism. Hoffmann (1991:9,10) suggests that the terms multi- and plurilingualism are favoured in some European countries where there is greater linguistic diversity such as in Belgium, Germany and Switzerland. Another interesting term that appears in some texts is bilinguality (and also multilinguality) which in most cases refers to individual bilingualism as opposed to societal bilingualism. Hamers and Blanc (1989) use bilinguality specifically to refer to the ‘psychological state of the individual who has access to more than one linguistic code as a means of social communication’ and the term bilingualism to refer to ‘the state of the individual or a community characterized by the simultaneous presence of two languages’ (ibid.). In this paper however, we will use the term bilingualism to refer to the use of two or more languages unless stated otherwise and we will refrain from using the term bilinguality.

3.2 Minimalist vs. Maximalist definitions

Bilingualism has been defined and described within a multitude of categories, scales and dichotomies all relating to various factors such as competence and proficiency and it is clear that different researchers have various different criteria in defining someone as bilingual and so it must be accepted that in describing and defining bilingualism (individual or societal) there are no clear cut-off points. In defining bilingualism there are minimalist and maximalist approaches. Haugen (1953), taking a minimalist approach, sees bilingualism as referring to any situation where an
individual can simply produce complete meaningful utterances in an additional language. Weinreich, a founding father of bilingual studies and also a bilingual himself, is also of the minimalist viewpoint with his loose definition of bilingualism: ‘The practice of alternately using two languages will be called bilingualism and the person involved, bilingual’ (Weinreich 1968). MacNamara (1967) considers someone a bilingual if they possess a minimal competence in an additional language in any of the four language skills: listening comprehension, speaking, reading and writing. Maximalists on the other hand demand a much higher level of competence in these skills for someone to be considered bilingual. Hoffmann (1991) cites Leonard Bloomfield’s (1933) definition of bilingualism:

‘In the cases where this perfect foreign-language learning is not accompanied by loss of the native language, it results in ‘bilingualism’, native-like control of two languages. […] Of course, one cannot define a degree of perfection at which a good foreign speaker becomes bilingual: the distinction is relative.’

Hoffmann then notes what she perceives as a contradiction on his part when she states: ‘if one cannot define “a degree of perfection” in bilingualism, how can we talk of “perfect foreign-language learning”? ’ Other linguists also of the maximalist viewpoint considers that for someone to qualify as bilingual, they must have equal ease in both languages in all four language skills (listening comprehension, speaking, reading and writing). These bilinguals described can be termed as balanced bilinguals (as opposed to unbalanced bilinguals), a type of person rarely found in this world. This maximalist definition of bilingualism eliminates many people who consider themselves to be bilingual, including myself as I can safely say that my literacy skills in Chinese are significantly of a much lower standard in comparison to my literacy skills in English and indeed in German (a language I acquired later in life through formal education). Apart from the above four language skills, another issue that needs to be addressed here in relation to balanced bilinguals is the context in which the languages of a bilingual are acquired and when and where a bilingual uses their different languages (code-switching) as this also affects their proficiency of one language over the other in different situations.
3.3 Factors in describing bilingualism

Whether one takes a maximalist or minimalist viewpoint of bilingualism, there are several factors that need to be considered in the description of bilingualism. The factors listed by Hoffmann (1991:24) are outlined briefly below:

(1) The topics of ‘early bilingualism’ and ‘late bilingualism’ address the age of the bilingual at the time of acquisition.

(2) The context in which the individual acquires the two languages, whether under unstructured ‘natural’ circumstances or through systematic instruction such as formal education. This factor is associated in differentiating between Adler’s ‘ascribed’ and ‘achieved’ bilingualism (see 4.1).

(3) The relationship between sign and meaning, or communicative competence, which deals with the mental organisation of language of a bilingual.

(4) The order and consequence of bilingual language acquisition which deals with the maintenance of the ability to use two languages.

(5) The competence of a bilingual speaker in two languages which was already addressed in 3.2 above, the main dividing factor between minimalist and maximalist definitions of bilingualism.

(6) The use and function of the different languages at the disposal of a bilingual in different situations, whether these uses are by conscious choice or related to the bilingual’s competence in the language skills. This factor is fundamental in the bilingual phenomenon of ‘code-switching’.

(7) The attitudes of bilinguals towards their own bilingualism which concerns self-identification and identification by others as a bilingual and feeling ‘at home’ or belonging to one or more linguistic groups.
4 Who is bilingual?

4.1 Bilingual labels

There are a plethora of different labels that have been attached to various types of bilingual individuals. Here we take a look at some of the most commonly used labels.

**Early and late bilinguals**

As mentioned earlier, these terms are associated with the age of the bilingual at the time of acquiring the second language. In older publications, *early bilingualism* was sometimes used to refer to *natural* or *primary* bilingualism, i.e. bilingualism acquired under natural circumstances in childhood and thus considered to be *pure* bilingualism, whereas *late bilingualism* was used to refer to *artificial* or *secondary* bilingualism, bilingualism acquired later in life (how much later depending on the author’s own opinions in relation to the critical period hypothesis and LAD). Adler (1977) coined the expressions *ascribed bilingualism*, which was mainly used to refer to childhood bilingualism and *achieved bilingualism* to refer to bilingualism applied to older bilinguals who *learnt* an additional language. The general assumption taken by many in the past was that adult bilinguals had acquired the additional language through formal instruction such as schooling and not under naturalistic conditions, and thus not considered ‘true’ or *pure* bilinguals. In more recent years however, the terms *early* and *child bilingualism* are generally used to apply to the child who has been in contact with two (or more) languages from birth onwards and also to the child who has acquired an additional language in early childhood after the first language has been established and *late bilingualism* is used to apply to the individual who has become bilingual after childhood. Thus here we will also use these definitions accordingly to be associated with the age of bilingual at the time of bilingual acquirement regardless of the additional language being acquired ‘naturally’ or ‘artificially’. Also associated these terms is simultaneous and sequential bilingualism, where the former is applied where both languages are introduced simultaneously to the child from birth onwards and the latter is applied where the additional language is introduced to the child or adult after the first language has been established. The issue of whether or not early bilingualism is ‘better’ than late bilingualism is one of the
main questions asked by parents and linguists alike and will be discussed later on in a subsequent chapter.

**Balanced and unbalanced bilinguals**

The concept of *a balanced bilingual* (*equilingualism*) is associated with the maximalist definition of bilingualism, which also seems to be the common perception of bilingualism. The balanced bilingual by definition should have roughly equal degrees of proficiency in both (or all) their languages across a range of contexts. Lambert, Havelka and Gardner (1959) use *balanced bilingual* to refer to an individual who is fully competent in both their languages. Christopherson (1948) considers bilingual ‘a person who knows two languages with approximately the same degree of perfection of as a unilingual speaker’, in which case it would first be necessary to define this concept of ‘perfection’ before we can say who is bilingual and who is not. Exactly how proficient does someone need to be in a language to be considered competent? The problem with the idealistic notion of balanced bilingualism is that it attempts to describe bilingual competence using the set of standards of linguistic competence expected of an *ideal* monolingual. For example, consider an individual X who can speak languages A and B fluently but has poor literacy skills in language B compared to that of his language A, and then consider an individual Y who is a monolingual speaker of language B but has poor literacy skills. Speaker X would not fit into the maximalist idea of a bilingual (aforementioned in chapter 3.2), as X would not be considered competent in language B (because a bilingual according to that definition must be a *balanced bilingual*, in which case an *unbalanced bilingual* would not be any type of bilingual at all but rather some sort of oxymoron), but how would maximalists classify speaker Y then? Would Y be an incompetent speaker of his/her one and only native tongue? The fundamental problem therein lies in the difficulty of measuring linguistic competence (bilingual or monolingual) and defining a ‘degree of perfection’ in language proficiency as well as deciding how a bilingual should be measured against a monolingual, i.e. who should be the basis of assessment.

At any rate, there are very few bilinguals in the world who consider themselves (and are considered by others) to be balanced bilinguals as there is often the presence of a more dominant language in which they are more proficient (the term *dominant bilingual* is also sometimes used). More often than not, the dominant language is also
the language that the bilingual prefers to use and/or feels more ‘at home’ with though there are factors such as context to consider which serves as a basis for language selection and therefore can lead to one language being more developed than the other in certain contexts, certain situations or on different topics of conversation. Moreover, the majority of linguists agree that most bilinguals in the world are unbalanced bilinguals and thus there is the common convention of listing the dominant language of a bilingual first, e.g. I would consider myself to be an English-Cantonese bilingual as English is my dominant language.

**Productive and receptive bilingual**

Bilingualism described in terms of use or function concentrate on the ways in which language is used. Definitions of bilingualism alluding to the practice of using language as a tool is reflected in Weinreich’s definition (see 3.2) where he refers to the ‘practice of alternating between two languages’. More importantly, Mackey (1970: 554) sees bilingualism ‘not [as] a phenomenon language’ but rather ‘a characteristic of its use.’ In other words, he sees bilingualism as belonging to the domain of parole and not of langue, two linguistic terms used by the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure. As with all the other labels used in describing bilingualism, the definition of the terms productive and receptive bilinguals differ with each and every author. In general, a receptive bilingual is used to refer to someone who may have receptive or passive skills in another language, such as listening and reading comprehension, but may be very limited in productive or active skills such speaking and writing, while on the other hand a productive bilingual may have both receptive and productive skills. In my own family, my two youngest siblings, Fergus and Sinéad, could be considered by some as receptive English-Cantonese bilinguals, as they are able to understand Cantonese but have limited skills in writing and speaking. Baetens Beardsmore (1982: 17) provides a table illustrating the various possible combinations of the four language skills (two receptive skills and two productive) with respect to productive and receptive bilingualism, though no information regarding the proficiency of these language skills are provided.

**Double semilinguals**

The double semilingual is a proposed category of bilinguals who is seen as having language deficiencies in both their languages in when these languages are placed in
comparison to the language of monolinguals. Their language skills compared to monolinguals are significantly lower and as a result they don’t feel fluent in either language. Double semilinguals are not considered to be balanced bilinguals and nor do they fit into a category of unbalanced or dominant bilinguals as their stronger language (if they do have one) lacks sufficient competence to be considered as significantly dominant. This label generally carries negative connotations. The notion of double semilingualism is a somewhat controversial issue (a) due to the negative view it creates towards bilingualism and its suggestion that learning a second language may have negative affects on the general linguistic ability of the individual and hamper linguistic development of either language (especially in relation to children acquiring language) and (b) due to the lack of reliable evidence that supports it. Although there are cases where individuals may not be satisfactorily proficient in either language, this is rarely the case and thus isn’t a very widespread phenomenon. The notion of double semilingualism has received much criticism; Baker and Prys Jones (1998) outline some of these below:

- The term semilingualism carries negative connotations, which invokes expectations of underachievement and failure.
- There are other causes for language deficiencies other than bilingualism itself, such as social factors, economic and political conditions etc.
- One has to consider the use and function of each of the languages because bilinguals use their languages for different purposes.
- The tests most often used to measure language proficiencies and differentiate between people are insensitive to the unquantifiable aspects of language and the range of competencies.
- There is a significant lack of reliable empirical evidence to constitute such a category of bilinguals.
- An apparent language deficiency may be due to unfair comparisons with monolinguals who may differ in the way they develop and use language.
4.2 Patterns of bilingual acquisition

There are many different situations in which a child can become bilingual and the way one becomes bilingual and how they maintain their bilingualism vary from family to family. In this section we will discuss the most common situations, which can lead to bilingual acquisition.

*Rich linguistic diversity*

This type of bilingual acquisition is most common in Europe and Africa where there is rich linguistic diversity and plenty of opportunity for close contact with other linguistic groups. Multilingual nations can be described as ‘officially’ or ‘de facto’ multilingual (note that ‘de facto’ multilingual can also be ‘official’). In ‘de facto’ bilingual societies, there is more than one community language and all of these languages are used by the majority of the population, but when and where to use each language depends on the function and domain. For example in the People’s Republic of China, Mandarin Chinese is the official language used for public documents, the national media and the language of instruction in schools, but there are over 70 different ethnic groups and associated regional languages (or dialects) that the majority of her citizens can be said to use more than one language on a daily basis.

*Bilingual families*

This situation can often be found within the above situation, as intermarriage between people from different linguistic backgrounds is more common in communities where there is rich linguistic diversity and where different linguistic groups live in close proximity to one another than in countries where there is less linguistic diversity. Within a family, it could be the case that parent X is from language background A and parent Y is from language background B and their children may grow up speaking both languages if both parents continue to use their respective native tongues to communicate to their children. This pattern is known as the ‘one parent one language’ principle. Another language may also be involved in the community language is neither A nor B, in which case the children may grow up to be bilingual in three languages. If the community language were the same as that of one parent, that language would most likely grow to be the more dominant one. A variety of factors affecting bilingualism in these cases may come into play, such as consistency of the
OPOL principle, what language the parents use to communicate with each other, social support from both the minority and majority language community, attitudes these language groups have towards one another, whether or not the additional languages are deemed useful and also interaction with other family members who share a language or use a different language altogether.

**Immigration**

Immigration involves the complete resettlement of a family from the country of origin to a new host country belonging to a different linguistic community. This resettlement is seen as permanent and host countries such as the United States of America, Canada, Britain and France have seen large-scale immigration. Bilingualism within these families in these cases are usually seen as being of a transitory nature and only lasting for a few generations. Hoffmann (1991) notes that in these cases, children of immigrants usually acquire their first language at home from their parents and other family members and the second language (or community language), that of the new host country, from people outside the home. In many cases, no special provision is made for immigrant families and children of immigrants were expected to ‘sink’ or ‘swim’ when they entered the school system where the community language is used as the language of instruction. Immigrant families were expected to adapt to the customs, norms and cultural society of the host country. Due in part to this cultural assimilation, linguistic assimilation also often follows. A common fate of the language of the country of origin (LA) is illustrated as follows:

1\(^{st}\) generation (or phase 1): LA, some LB  
2\(^{nd}\) generation (or phase 2): LA and LB  
3\(^{rd}\) generation (or phase 3): some LA, LB  
4\(^{th}\) generation (or phase 4): LB

Of course the number of generations bilingualism can span varies from case to case and phases may overlap. In the case of my family, my parents immigrated to Ireland from Hong Kong before my siblings and I were born and as a result, we skip phase 1 altogether and our family can be more aptly placed somewhere around phases 2 and 3 and there is considerable amount of English mixed in when we speak Cantonese-Chinese.
Migration

Migration in contrast to immigration refers to the temporary movement from the country of origin to a host country. In these cases, migrant families do not plan to remain in the host country for a very long period and it is expected that they will eventually return to their country of origin and so it is important that they maintain the language of their home country. Children of migrants may acquire their first language from their parents and depending on their individual circumstances, they may or may not acquire the language of the host country. More often than not, no provision is usually made to cater for children of migrants because the host country generally doesn’t feel obliged to. Due to the large variety of circumstances that surround different migrant families such as length of stay in a country, purpose of migration and socio-economic conditions, bilingual acquisition in these cases are more variable and much more unpredictable than in the cases of families in the other situations above. Indeed, a child of migrants may not even come into contact with the language of the host country at all (or enough exposure to the outside language to be considered at all significant), if the family is living among people belonging to the same linguistic group and if the child attends schooling where the language of instruction is that of the home language. Such is the case of many English speaking migrant families living in Hong Kong (usually families of businessmen and diplomats) where there are ‘international schools’ where the language of instruction is English and where public signs and documents etc. are in both English and Cantonese.

Formal Education

Bilingualism can be achieved through the means of the school system. Bilingualism achieved through formal education is seen as sequential bilingualism as it introduces the additional language after the first language has been established. In this sense, this type of bilingualism falls within the domain of second language acquisition and second language teaching. How successful formal education is in establishing bilingualism depends greatly on factors (social, economic and political) such as attitudes towards the target language and the teaching methods employed. In most schools around the world, there are foreign-language or minority language immersion courses available within the school curriculum either on the primary and/or secondary
level education but few tend to aim for high proficiency and bilingualism is not expected. A clear example is the compulsory Irish language programme in Ireland’s primary and secondary schools, which has in general been unsuccessful in fostering bilingualism. Schools, which teach through a foreign or minority language such as the Gaelscoileanna in Ireland, are more successful in nurturing bilingualism in an individual than immersion programs. There is also the practice of sending one’s child to study abroad in boarding schools etc. but this is usually for more well-off families as it is a more expensive option and thus belongs to the category of \textit{élite bilingualism}.

5 Choosing to raise bilingual children

5.1 Reasons for raising bilingual children

There is a multitude of different reasons why parents would choose to raise their children bilingually. For some, exposure to more than one language is inevitable such as in the cases of immigrants where immigrant children acquire their mother tongue from their parents and acquire the additional language from the community. In these cases, reasons for maintaining the language of the country of origin are usually linked to the preservation of cultural heritage in the family and the ability to communicate with other family members (such as grandparents) who may not speak the community language. In the community sense, the native language is seen as preserving the cultural identity of a minority group such as the Indian population in Britain and the various Chinese communities in the United States and Canada, which have managed to keep the native language alive down through many generations. On the other hand, it seems that some European languages have been less successful in being passed down from generation to generation as is the case of European immigrants to the United States.

During my research on the topic, I found that one of the main reasons parents have for choosing to raise bilingual children was the ability to ‘pass on the gift of an additional language’ to their children. However, it must be noted that the parents surveyed were members of bilingual family networking groups found on the internet and it must be
taken into consideration that the majority of these members were communicating with their children in a language other than their own native tongue and the language of the community. As it is considered more natural for a parent to communicate with their children using their own native language, linguists have until recently ignored situations where parents use a language other than their mother tongue. Members of bilingual networking groups clearly have an interest in nurturing bilingualism in their children and therefore we must also take this type of situation into account. Other primary reasons for raising bilingual children include the nurturing of positive attitudes towards different cultures and giving their children a ‘head start’ in life either academically, where the learning of a foreign or minority language is compulsory in the school curriculum, or socially and economically, where an additional language may be seen as useful or advantageous. Some linguists and parents alike also believe that bilingualism can positively effect the neurological development of children.

5.2 Initial problems and concerns

As each individual case is different, each family may have different concerns regarding bilingual parenting and may encounter different types of problems either before deciding to raise their child bilingually, or after when they try to maintain bilingual language development. We can however identify some common concerns and problems related to families in specific situations. There are many factors at work when it comes to these situations and many of these are social issues such as positive and negative attitudes towards bilingualism and biculturalism. In predominantly monolingual societies, the decision to raise children bilingually may be met with some scepticism, especially if the target language in question isn’t perceived to be of any significant benefit. Even if parents decide that they want to raise their child bilingually, they may be discouraged from other family members and friends who hold a negative view of bilingualism. A common misconception is the belief that the child may become ‘confused’ and mix their two languages together or that bilingualism may have detrimental effects on their language development in general and resulting in low proficiency in both their languages. Questions regarding some of the major concerns and issues surrounding child bilingualism will be further explored
in detail in chapter seven where competing theories will be examined and compared. In section 4.2 we looked at the common patterns of bilingual acquisition, in the next chapter we look at methods, which are used by parents who consciously and actively foster bilingualism and explore the advantages and disadvantages in using these methods.

### 6 Methods in raising bilingual children

Harding and Riley (1986) and likewise Romaine (1995), classify several categories of childhood bilingual acquisition based on factors such as the native language of the parents, the language(s) of the community and the strategy the parents use in speaking to their child. Harding and Riley identify five categories whereas Romaine identifies an additional sixth category because she observes that Harding and Riley’s five categories mainly serve as a purpose to give guidelines to parents on the most successful strategies to raise bilingual children. Here we will group these situations in terms of the strategy and identify some specific problems and concerns associated with each situation where the particular strategy is used and what are the advantages and disadvantages associated with each method (with regards to ‘successful’ bilingual parenting). In the appendix, I have included case studies – specifically, two cases where the ‘one person – one language’ method is adopted and where a parent is communicating with the child in his/her non-native language, two cases where the ‘home language’ method is adopted and likewise the minority language is taught by non-native parents and another case where there is a combination of both. Most of the points illustrated below are drawn from these case studies and of other studies including some examples from my own bilingual upbringing.

#### 6.1 One person – one language policy (OPOL)

#### 6.1.1 Where is the ‘OPOL’ policy used?

This strategy involves the parents each using a different language to communicate with the child. From examining several case studies, the usual situation in which this
strategy is adopted is where the parents have different native tongues and so wish to communicate using their own language. There are different types of situations where the ‘one person – one language’ policy is employed.

**OPOL: Situation 1**
In this situation the parents each speak a different native language and have some degree of competence in the other’s language. The language of the community is the same as that of one of the parents. Harding and Riley classify this particular situation as ‘Type 1: One Person – One Language’.

**OPOL: Situation 2**
Similar to the previous situation, the parents each speak a different native language but the language of the community is different from either of the parents’ languages. Harding and Riley classify this situation as ‘Type 4: Double Non-Dominant Home Language without Community Support’. In these situations, a child may grow up to be trilingual.

**OPOL: Situation 3**
In this situation both parents share the same native language and their native language is also the language of the community. In this situation, one of the parents speaks to the child in his/her non-native language. This situation corresponds to Harding and Riley’s ‘Type 5: Non-native Parents’.

### 6.1.2 Advantages and disadvantages
Linguists such as Ronjat (1913) and Leopold (1939) advocated the ‘one person – one language’ approach as the most effective method of raising bilingual children in the home. Werner Leopold, a linguist and considered one of the founding fathers of the study of child bilingualism, began keeping a detailed diary of his daughter’s bilingual acquisition and language development in English and German. His diaries contained records of his daughter Hildegard’s speech starting from the time she was eight weeks old until the end of her second year. Leopold spoke to his wife and daughter in German, whereas his wife spoke English. As a result, Hildegard was exposed to two
languages in the home from birth onwards. Many other linguist/parents have also adopted this OPOL strategy such as Ronjat (1913), Hoffmann (1991) and Taeschner (1983).

**Context and language awareness**

There are some advantages in choosing the OPOL strategy. Assuming that both the parents will spend considerable amount of time with the child in his/her early life, then the child will be simultaneously exposed to two languages and will begin to become familiarised with both the language systems (sounds, patterns, words etc.). Hoffmann (1991: 86) states that there is evidence to support the argument that children raised by parents using the OPOL method have shown considerably less language mixing than those who have acquired their languages in ‘fused’ contexts. Hoffmann (ibid.) believes that the most influential factor in developing bilingual competence is ‘context’, in particular ‘human context’ and thus she suggests that the success of the OPOL method along with the importance of ‘context’ in bilingual competence, creates the assumption that the child in their early stages uses the person as a physical marker or reference for the language to be used so as to avoid confusion and disorder. In other words, the bilingual associates each person with the language that person uses, so the bilingual will normally choose to use the linguistic code associated with that particular person. Evidence that very young bilingual children are aware of different linguistic codes and that they associate different people with different languages are numerous, such as becoming visibly upset or correcting a parent when that parent, who would normally use language A, is heard to be using language B instead. There are also common occurrences where children (before being aware that a particular language has a name) would refer to their languages according to their respective parents or other individuals such as in utterances such as ‘like the way mommy says it’ or ‘like daddy says it’ or by sampling a few words in both languages such as ‘X talks like this’ (in language A) ‘but Y talks like this’ (in language B) or ‘like I’m talking now’ (in language A or B). Contrarily, Leopold claims that even though he and his wife consistently adhered to the ‘one person – one language’ rule, their daughter did not associate her languages with specific persons but he notes that although there were words that she knew both in German and in English, she would reserve the German form especially for one type of situation and the English form in another type of situation in a consistent manner, which suggests
that although she seemingly used both her languages indiscriminately with people, she sometimes differentiated them in other contextual situations.

**Group/family conversations**

In OPOL situations, however, we must also take into account the language both the parents use to communicate to *each other* in front of the child. The choice of language is usually determined by the competency of both the parents in the languages used in the household and it is normally the case that the language used in ‘family’ conversations is usually the one that everyone is competent in. If the parents continue to use their separate languages to communicate to each other (assuming that each parent has some competency in the language of the other parent, listening comprehension at minimum), the result is a somewhat odd conversation consisting of two languages. For some people, this pattern is difficult to maintain, especially if a parent is highly competent in both languages as they may find it difficult not to respond to something in the same language as their interlocutor. In situations where the language of one of the parents is the same as the community’s, the family may choose to use the language of the other parent, the non-community language (resulting in ‘minority language at home’ strategy adopted for these occasions) so that there is a perhaps a more balanced exposure to both languages or else if the other parent does not speak the non-community language, then the community language would be used. The advantage to this approach is that from an early age, the child is made aware that the different languages are each possible and distinct means of communication and which are separate entities (i.e. a tool that can be used) and not just an attribute of an individual. Hoffmann (1991: 87) calls this process a ‘separation of context’, where a language is essentially plucked from being in a solely human context (i.e. an attribute of just one person) and placed in a new separate context where it can be used by interactively by different people. While it is important for child bilinguals to separate their languages in some way (for reasons of communication), it is also important for them to realise that language is a communicative tool and through ‘separation of context’, children can then be made aware of not just their own bilingualism, but of the bilingualism of others too. Of course, the disadvantage of the OPOL method is that once a child realises that a parent can also understand the other language, he/she may only want to communicate using his/her preferred language (this may also occur in ‘minority language at home’ situations). Some parents employ methods to ensure
that the child ‘speak the correct language to the correct person’. In one case, a mother would refuse to respond to her child if he didn’t speak to her in the minority language (see Appendix: case study A). Another disadvantage is that if a parent has little or no knowledge of the other’s language, then he/she may feel excluded when that language is used as the other parent or the child will have to explain and translate what was just said. Situations like this can be frustrating and quite trying (see Appendix: case study A).

**Maintaining bilingualism**

In OPOL situations, usually the community language becomes the more dominant language of the child because he/she is more exposed to it as he/she grows older and starts to interact with the outside community more often, in particular when entering the school system and making friends with children his/her own age who speak the majority language. In situations such as ‘OPOL: Situation 1’ where the language of one of the parents is also the language of the community, the other language (the minority language) will usually become the weaker language. Turning points such as starting school will expose the child to rich stimuli in the majority language and it is at this stage that the child to show an increase in speech productivity (as with monolinguals). In all OPOL situations, it is important for the parents to provide the child with rich stimulus, such as books, video tapes and music, in the minority language so as to further develop the minority language and somehow keep it on the same level as that of the majority language. Maintaining a ‘balance’ between the two languages can be very difficult, especially if we compare the amount of time the child spends exposed to the majority language in a linguistically stimulating environment with a large amount of speakers to the amount of time spent with the one parent who can sometimes be the only means of exposure to the minority language. With families in situations where both the parents speak a different language to the child and both those languages are different to that of the community, this can also lead to some major problems where it may not be possible for both parents to spend a significant amount of time with the child or if in the case where there is a primary caregiver, then the language of the other parent could be neglected and become much more underdeveloped in comparison to the other languages. A problem with maintaining bilingualism as mentioned before, is the child’s refusal or reluctance to speak a language if he/she knows that the parent understands the other (preferred) language
perfectly well. This preference for the dominant language is further reinforced by social factors, such as the child’s desire to ‘fit in’ with his/her classmates (a very natural human behaviour) and a desire not to be perceived as being different to everyone else. This can often have an effect on the bilingual development of any younger siblings as the older child may likely want to communicate with the younger child in the preferred dominant language rather than in the minority language.

6.2 Home language policy

6.2.1 Where is the ‘home language’ policy used?

This strategy, also called the ‘minority language at home policy’, is based on ‘context’ or ‘environment’ where there is a distinction made between the community or ‘outside’ language and the home language. Typically, in internet networking groups, this policy is abbreviated as ML@H (or other variations of it). Some make a distinction between the lower case ‘m’ denoting the minority language and the upper case ‘M’ denoting the majority language in such statements as ‘M=English, m=German’ meaning ‘majority language is English, minority language is German’. In these cases, both parents speak to the child in the same language which is not that of the community. As both languages are not introduced from birth onwards, this is usually classed as near simultaneous bilingualism (the significance of this difference between simultaneous and near simultaneous bilingualism is debatable) but in any case it is most likely that the child would be exposed to the community language from the very early stages through contact with outside visitors, other family members and probably child minders who speak the community language. Below are the typical situations where this policy is employed.

ML@H: Situation 1

In this situation both parents speak different native languages and the language of one of the parents is also that of the community. Both parents speak to the child in the non-dominant language (i.e. not the community language). Harding and Riley classify this as ‘Type 2: Non-dominant Home Language/ One Language – One Environment’.
**ML@H: Situation 2**
Both parents share the same native language and this language is not the same as that of the community’s. Both parents speak to their child in their native language. Harding and Riley classify this as ‘Type 3: Non-dominant Home Language without Community Support’. This particular situation is typical of immigrant or migrant families, often unintentionally as it would be perceived to be the most natural thing to do.

**ML@H: Situation 3**
Both the parents share the same native language and this language is also that of the community’s. Both parents have proficient knowledge of a second language (or they are bilingual) and they speak to their children in the second/minority language from birth. This type of situation has not been directly identified either by Harding and Riley or by Romaine, probably because it is less common than the previous aforementioned situations.

### 6.2.2 Advantages and disadvantages

**Context and language awareness**
The ‘home language’ policy shares some of the same advantages and disadvantages with the ‘one parent – one language’ policy and they are more or less based on the same principles and theories. With respect to ‘context’, instead of ‘human context’ where the child associates each language with a particular person, we talk about ‘environmental context’ which involves the environment, be it a physical place such as the school or a different country, or the group of people surrounding the child such as the home and family members, as a reference or marker for a particular language. The ‘minority language at home’ strategy involves the minority language as belonging to the domain of ‘home’ and ‘family’ whereas the majority language is ‘outside’ the home, in the community. In cases where a language may be linked to an ethnic group which has certain noticeable physical characteristics associated with it, this can also influence language choice in child bilinguals. In the case of my family, when my siblings and I were much younger, we would address ‘people who looked Chinese’ in
Cantonese and address everyone else in English. At that time in Ireland (the late 1980’s and 90’s), our assumptions that they spoke Cantonese were usually correct but as we grew older we became aware that not all people who looked Chinese spoke Cantonese. Funnily enough, these days I am surprised to hear a ‘Chinese-looking person’ speak Cantonese as the population of the Mandarin-speaking Chinese in Ireland has dramatically increased in recent years and now easily outnumber the Cantonese-speaking Chinese community.

**Group/family conversations**

An advantage that families using the ML@H strategy enjoy is the relative ease in choosing the language to be used during conversations with the participation of both parents in comparison to the OPOL strategy. As both parents speak the minority language to the child, then naturally the minority language is used as the language of family communication and no disruptions such as translation, which might hinder the flow of conversation, need occur.

**Maintaining bilingualism**

Like the OPOL method, maintaining bilingualism involves actively providing sufficient and enriching stimuli in both languages. As the child reaches school age and begins to communicate more frequently with members of the outside community, he/she may switch preference from the home language (if that was the dominant language) to the community language as he/she learns new words in the community language and gets used to hearing it more often and using it among his/her peers in school. This (likewise mentioned in discussing OPOL) may affect the bilingual acquisition of any younger siblings he/she may have (see Appendix: case study D).

**6.3 Discussion**

Although the OPOL principle and the ML@H principle are firmly established as ideal starting points for the raising of bilingual children, in reality there are also many families which use different strategies which may be a combination of the two strategies in some form or the other or may have seemingly no discernible structure or
pattern at all. With respect to the latter form, Romaine does mention a ‘Type 6: Mixed Languages’ type of situation whereby both parents are bilinguals, sectors of the community may be bilingual and their ‘strategy’ (if we may describe it as such) is to use code-switching and mix the languages. She does however acknowledge that this type ‘leads (arguably) to more mixing and interference than the other types, but it is nevertheless probably the most frequently occurring context for ‘natural’ bilingual acquisition in multilingual societies’. In multilingual societies such as these, the effects of cross-linguistic factors may result in linguistic peculiarities idiosyncratic to that society in which case we can observe the connection between individual and societal bilingualism. There are many books which serve as guides for parents who wish to raise their children bilingually, among them are the popular ‘Bilingual Children: guidance for the family’ (Saunders: 1982a) and ‘Raising Multilingual Children: Foreign Language Acquisition and Children’ Tokukama-Espinosa (2000) and most of them agree that once a particular pattern and strategy is chosen, consistency plays a key role in establishing bilingualism.

6.3.1 Consistency

Romaine cites examples of studies conducted on families where the parents spoke to their children in mixed languages and that there was no clear lines of distinction as to when and where and to whom each language was spoken. She cites Smith’s (1935) case study of an English/Chinese family where the children were born in China and remained there until the youngest was aged 1:8 and apart from one year living in the USA, the children had grown up in a predominantly Chinese-speaking environment being exposed to Chinese speaking nurses, servants and other children. Both their parents spoke English and Chinese to them with no clear demarcation between the two. Romaine notes that Smith reports that most of these children mixed their languages until their third year, more mixing than in case studies of families where there was a clear demarcation of the languages. Romaine cites a few more similar cases where parents mixed their languages and subsequently language mixing was more common and lasted longer in their children than in those following consistent patterns.
6.3.2 Flexibility

In case study E (see Appendix: case study E), we examined a family where the OPOL method was first adopted but as the majority language became more and more dominant, the parents decided to switch strategy and opted for the ‘minority language at home’ policy which exposed the child to more of the weaker language. Of course, this kind of flexibility was only possible because both parents were able to speak the minority language and we were strong-willed enough to shake off the old pattern and adopt a new habit, which couldn’t have been an easy thing to achieve.

6.3.3 Stimulus

The first five case studies were of ‘successful’ families in that they achieved a relatively high degree of proficiency in both languages. Consistency may or may not have contributed to the direct success of bilingualism but it is clear that a strict consistent pattern helped to establish the importance of both languages so that the community language would not over-dominate the minority language. We cannot ignore the fact that the parents in these case studies have placed emphasis on language learning media such as books, videos and audiotapes in the minority language from an early age and continue to provide their children with such stimuli, which have undoubtedly aided the bilingual development of these children.
7 Major issues in bilingual parenting

In chapter five we introduced some of the problems and concerns surrounding the topic of raising bilingual children. Below we shall discuss some of these major issues and take a deeper look at the competing theories and current trends.

7.1 Are child bilinguals more adept than adult bilinguals?

The advice usually given to parents is to raise their children in two languages from birth onwards and the rule of thumb seems to be ‘the earlier, the better’. But how early is early and when is it too late? Do children actually acquire language faster and more efficiently than adults do?

Behaviourist vs. nativist theories

There are many linguists who believe that in order to be a ‘true’ bilingual, one must be exposed to the two languages in early childhood. This belief would seem to suggest that children have greater second language learning abilities than adults, which brings us to one of the most interesting topic in linguistics – the nature versus nurture (nativist vs. non-nativist theories) debate which introduced the notions of the language acquisition device and the critical period hypothesis. Whereas the psychologist and behaviourist B. F. Skinner (1957) suggested that language was simply a form of behaviour subject to the control of the environment and conditions surrounding the speaker and that stimulus alone was responsible for the acquisition of language, Chomsky (1959) in stark contrast believed that children, unlike adults, were somehow pre-wired or predisposed from birth to acquire language. Chomsky uses various cases to support this theory, citing examples such as immigrant families where the children were observed to be able to acquire the language of the host country with more ease and fluency than their parents. This hypothesised innate gearing towards language acquisition was termed the ‘Language Acquisition Device’ (LAD) and received much support at the time despite the fact that Chomsky’s review of Skinner’s book has also suffered much criticism (c.f. Kenneth MacCorquodale's 1970 paper, On Chomsky’s Review of Skinner’s Verbal Behavior). The language acquisition device
(which Chomsky later expanded to the idea of the *Universal Grammar*) supposedly starts functioning when activated by contact with natural language.

Along with the LAD hypothesis, followed the notion of the ‘critical period’, which is the supposed period in which children are particularly adept at acquiring language. This period is usually defined as from the age of 2 years till the age of puberty. Some psycholinguists believed that before the age of two, language acquisition was not possible due to ‘maturational factors’ in the brain and that as the child grows older, the brain becomes less receptive to language learning and language acquisition at this later stage is much more difficult. Lenneberg (1967) stated that the critical period of the LAD ended when the child reaches the age of 12 and that language learned after the age of 12 could never be learned in a ‘normal and fully functional sense’ (Lenneberg in Hoffmann 1991), i.e. it would never be ‘natural’ or ‘perfect’. Others believe that the critical period ends well before puberty. The idea of the critical period has received much criticism, particularly because of the fact that the age limits of the critical period have been defined and redefined numerous times by different researchers and that these limits are seemingly arbitrary.

**Phonological development**

Advocates of the LAD and critical period hypothesis cite cases of children who speak a second language with ease and with no traces of a ‘foreign accent’ or other interference from their other language as evidence of the existence of the LAD and critical period. We can not deny that there is a significant number of cases where bilingual children are perceived to have better pronunciation abilities than their adult counterparts but as an explanation for this, Hoffmann (1991) points out that children have certain abilities such as learning by playing and mimicking and that they lack certain inhibitions that adults may have and that these characteristics can have a positive effect on their language fluency and pronunciation, but maintains that there is no solid evidence to suggest that adult learners can not acquire a native-like accent. Acquisition of a native-like accent in adults, it seems, is more dependent on the individual’s linguistic aptitude and pronunciation skills and perhaps due to positive or negative transfer from their first language to their second.
Language learning abilities

As for the process of learning, nativist theories suggest that children are more adept at learning a language than adults are. There are numerous important flaws in this comparison between child bilingual and adult bilingual learners. Firstly, if the language acquisition device is indeed activated from the onset of language contact (so from birth), then we should not dismiss the first years of the child’s life. We can observe that the child spends a considerable amount of the time listening to a language before he/she is capable of constructing meaningful utterances in that language, whereas the adult learner can learn and produce new words in a second language almost immediately. Secondly, in comparing the repertoire of a child to that of an adult, we must first define the levels of linguistic standards we expect from the child and adult bilingual. We find that the language used by a child is nowhere near as sophisticated as that of an adult, simply because the levels of standard expected from an adult is much higher than those expected of a child, in which case the comparison of the language used by child bilinguals and adult bilinguals are ineffective in deciding whether or not child bilinguals are more efficient language learners than adult bilinguals. Thirdly, children lack the analytical abilities of adults, which enable them to generalise over a set of concepts and which allow them to transfer and abstract ideas and patterns from one language to another (positive transfer) such as grammar rules and analogies and this advantage would also enable them to use different styles of address where they see fit. As an example, I have a 22 year old friend who having no previous knowledge of the Spanish language, spent 3 months in Peru where she took Spanish lessons and interacted with the local people, and at the end of the trip was able to conduct lengthy conversations with native Spanish-speakers on a variety of topics ranging from politics to food – although she made some grammatical errors, I would be more surprised if a child was able to reach that same level of linguistic competence under the same conditions.

It must also be noted that most of these nativist theories examine bilingualism in general from a primarily monolingual perspective. Grosjean (1982), a linguist and bilingual himself, has championed the holistic approach to bilingualism, i.e. bilingualism from a bilingual perspective where the bilingual is not seen at ‘two monolinguals in one person’ but rather being an individual with two or more first languages. Thus we can see that child bilingualism has more to do with first language
acquisition and that adult bilingualism belongs more to the domain of second language acquisition.

Relevance to bilingual parenting

It is clear that we can not compare child bilinguals to adult bilinguals, simply because children and adults are altogether too different from each other and the difference between the levels of linguistic standards expected from each of them are significantly great. However, that is not to say that starting bilingual parenting from the early stages has no advantages. Indeed if learning in general corresponds to the amount of time spent on the subject, then there will be no harm in exposing the child to a second language as soon as possible. With a view to bilingual parenting, it seems that the majority of parents have opted to introduce the second language to their children in early childhood as soon as possible, regardless of their views concerning the LAD and critical period hypothesis. As they are still very much hypotheses, I have found that many parents are ‘taking the safe option’ and exposing their children to more than one language from birth or infancy. Other advantages in introducing children to an additional language as early as possible is (a) getting into the habit of using the chosen strategy consistently and regularly and (b) effectively forcing the child into bilingualism through ‘unconscious’ learning.

7.2 Will the child get confused between the languages?

A common misconception about bilingualism is the belief that the child will get confused between the languages and consequently will not be completely fluent in both or either language resulting in (so-called) semilingualism and double semilingualism. Grosjean (1982) estimates that about half the world’s population are bilinguals (the majority are or became bilingual during childhood), and so the implication that half the world’s population have a language deficiency due to their bilingualism seems like a rather extreme and incredulous notion. Unsurprisingly, negative attitudes to bilingualism are generally found in primarily monolingual societies where there may be negative attitudes to minority groups and likewise
minority languages. Some communities are typically bilingual, for example the Hakka Chinese (Hakka literally meaning ‘guest families’ in Cantonese) are a traditionally migratory subgroup of the larger Han-Chinese ethnic group and have their own language Hakka as well as typically adopting the language of the majority. There are quite a lot of misconceptions and confusion regarding the definitions of certain features of bilingual speech such as code-switching, mixing, borrowing and interference which in the past, due to negative attitudes towards bilingualism, were and are sometimes are still seen to be evidence of language confusion, but one thing is certain - it is clear that adults who acquired two languages from childhood are aware that they are using different linguistic codes. Indeed there is also evidence that young bilingual children are aware of the two languages (as discussed in chapter six) and this ability to keep their languages apart relates primarily to the different contexts in which the languages are acquired. Grosjean introduced the idea of language mode to describe the bilingual’s different states of mind which he believes correlates with certain features of bilingual language mixing. In section 7.2.2 we look at language mixing in child bilinguals.

7.2.1 Language mode

The concept of language mode was first developed by Grosjean (1994, 2000) as a means to illustrate a bilingual’s linguistic state when under different environmental or contextual situations and also as a means of explaining the phenomena that are characteristics of bilingual speech (code-switching etc.). Grosjean describes language mode as ‘the state of activation of the bilingual’s language and language processing mechanisms at a given point in time’. He explains that bilinguals at various points will find themselves somewhere on the ‘situational continuum’ and this will correspond to a particular language mode which in turn is associated with different bilingual features in speech. He explains that at one end of the situational continuum, the bilingual is in a completely monolingual mode in that he/she is interacting with only monolinguals of one the languages the bilingual knows and in which case that language is ‘switched on’ or ‘active’ and the other(s) are ‘switched off’ or ‘deactivated’, though there is considerable doubt to whether or not a language could be ever entirely ‘switched off’. On the other end of the continuum, the bilingual is in
bilingual mode in that he/she is in a situation communicating with other bilinguals who share the same two or more languages. In this case, both (or more) languages are active but the language that is used as the main language of communication, also called the ‘base language’ is more active than the other languages. In the bilingual language mode, there is a higher frequency of occurrences of language mixing such as code-switching and borrowing. There are various points between these two ends of the continuum, which depend on factors such as interlocutor, situation, context and topic of discourse and the function of the interaction between the speakers.

**Interference, code-switching and borrowing**

Grosjean believes that much of the misunderstanding surrounding different types of language mixing stems from the fact that researchers and non-researchers alike do not take into account the language mode that the bilingual is in. He claims that much of the data on language mixing were most likely taken from when the subject was in bilingual mode and thus should not be taken as an accurate profile of bilingual speech in general. He claims that language mixing, which he uses as a blanket term for both code-switching and borrowing, does not occur in monolingual mode (although there are some exceptions) but that other types of interference which are ‘speaker-specific deviations from the language being spoken due to the influence of the other language(s)’ and that these types of interference include those such as phonological, lexical, syntactic and pragmatic. Grosjean divides interference into two separate categories, (a) static interferences, which are permanent traces of one language upon the other and (b) dynamic interference, which are not regular and may be described as an ‘accidental slip of the tongue’ due to interference from the ‘deactivated language(s)’ upon the ‘activated language’. Thus he believes that only data taken from when the subject is in monolingual mode should hold any real significance in gauging the extent of language mixing and interference in a bilingual individual.

In bilingual mode, a base language is chosen and elements of the other languages may be introduced in the bilingual’s speech through means such as code-switching and borrowing. **Code-switching** involves the complete shift from one language to the other for a phrase, a sentence or just a single word and thus may be considered as a juxtaposition of two languages working side by side. **Borrowing** on the other hand is considered the integration of elements of one language into another, which may
involve borrowing a word or expression from one language and adapting it morphologically and/or phonologically to the other language. There are two types of borrowing, (a) loanword borrowing, in which the language borrows both the form and content/meaning of the word, e.g. the German word *der Computer* (borrowed from the English *computer*), the English word *futon* (borrowed from Japanese) and (b) loanshift borrowing, which involves some sort of partial borrowing such as extending the meaning of a word from the base language to correspond to a word in the other language or taking a word from one language and applying it in the other language with a different meaning, e.g. the German word *der Beamer* (derived from the English verb *to beam* (shine) and taken to mean the English *video projector*), the German *das Handy* (derived from the English adjective *handy* (convenient) and taken to mean a mobile phone) or the adopting expressions in one language but using the words from the other (like a literal translation of a expression from one language into another and sometimes called loan translation or a calque), e.g. even the English word *loanword* is a calque from the German *Lehnwort*. Some of these loanword and loanshift borrowings have become firmly established as part of the vocabulary of a language community but when considering the transfer of one language upon the other in a bilingual individual, one should only account for code-switch and borrowings idiosyncratic to that individual.

7.2.2 Fused system vs. independent systems

The two current competing trends in explaining language mixing and whether or not language mixing is evidence of language confusion in children are (a) the unitary language system hypothesis and (b) the separate/independent development hypothesis, which differ on their views based on whether or not the languages of the bilingual function together or independently of each other. All the case studies examined in this project (see Appendix) show signs of indiscriminate language mixing in the early stages of the child regardless of what strategy is adopted.

**The unitary language system hypothesis**

This theory postulates that the bilingual child in the initial stages of development does not distinguish or differentiate between the two language systems and that instead, the
two languages function as a single ‘fused’ hybrid system, which only gradually over

time and in the course of development becomes separated (first their lexicon, then

t heir grammar). Many linguists such as Volterra and Taeschner (1978), Saunders


viewpoint. They view the substantial amount of language mixing, indiscriminate use

of the two languages in childhood and the gradual diminishing of language mixing as

the child gets older as evidence of this initial ‘fused’ language system.

**The separate/independent development hypothesis**

This theory postulates that the bilingual child is able to differentiate between their
different languages from a very early stage as evidenced by many accounts of cases
where it seemed that the child was aware of the separate linguistic codes. Supporters
of this theory believe that the language systems develop independently of each other.
Linguists such as Genesee (1989) point out that language mixing in children may not
be due to a ‘fused’ system but instead is a result of two (or more) separate language
systems, which have not yet been fully developed. Language mixing in this view can
be seen as a sign that the child may not know the translation equivalent of the word
they want to use and instead draw on both their lexical stores in order to make
themselves more understood, i.e. a sign of the child’s pragmatic incompetence. This
idea has not been entirely dismissed by supporters of the unitary system hypothesis
however, as Grosjean (1989) discusses this in reference to the **complementarity
principle** where addresses the context and domain in which the bilingual acquires and
uses his/her languages.

### 8 Conclusion

In this project, we have first looked at the plethora of definitions and descriptions of
bilingualism provided by a multitude of authors from various fields of the study of
linguistics. It is clear that it is highly unlikely that these linguists have any intention of
agreeing or comprising on a single definition any time in the near future. The layman,
likewise, has formed his/her own opinion of bilingualism. From the examination of
various case studies it is very clear that the active fostering of bilingualism is very
different from bilingualism occurring under more ‘natural’ circumstances such as in migrant and immigrant families. As we can see, the initial establishment of bilingualism in children may be no difficult task but the maintenance of bilingualism as the child grows older requires considerable time and effort. As there are many factors, which influence each family structure and their circumstances, it would be extremely naïve to think that there is ‘one perfect strategy’ that suits each family.

First and foremost there are factors, which we have no control over such as the aptitude of the child to learn a second language. The child may be born with a natural aptitude for language learning, whereby he/she finds it easier and quicker to learn language, or he/she may not, so it important for the parent to realise that every child is different and even if one follows the same strategy as a similar family, the results may vary. As to whether or not early bilingualism is ‘better’ than late bilingualism, opinion is still very much divided. Most parents however have decided that ‘the earlier, the better’, purely for practical reasons such as formation of habits, i.e. for parents to get accustomed to speaking a particular language to the child. Motivation is another important factor. Early language learning at home would also mean that the child is ‘unconsciously’ learning a second language and so will have less reluctance towards it. The attitudes of the community and family towards bilingualism also exerts a strong influence on motivational factors and it is clear that if there is a positive attitude towards the minority language, then the child would feel more motivated to speak the minority language. Other motivational factors include language usage. We have looked at strategies such as the ‘one person – one language’ policy and the ‘minority language at home’ policy and it is clear that consistent and strict adherence to certain patterns would make the child realise that he is required to use both languages in order to communicate and moreover consistency helps to form language use habits which may contribute positively to the maintenance of both languages and as evidenced from the various case studies, reduces the amount of language mixing. Undoubtedly, the more the child is exposed to language, the more he/she learns. Thus it is important to provide the child with enough stimuli in the minority language in order to strike a balance with the rich stimuli he/she is exposed to in the majority language. As the child develops, he/she will want to express him/herself in new, different and more complex ways and if he/she is unable to achieve this through the minority language, then the majority language would rapidly
dominate. As the child grows older, it may become more and more difficult to maintain the minority language. All findings from the case studies examined here suggest that the amount of language the child learns is directly proportional to what he/she is exposed to and suggests that in order to successfully establish and maintain bilingualism in an individual, a strategy must consist of a combination of the factors such as aptitude, motivation, positive attitudes, consistency, and exposure to sufficient stimuli, as well as being flexible when required. However, in order to accurately gauge the importance of these factors, we must conduct a critical analysis of the comparison between these case studies to case studies of bilingual children whereby language support is limited. Future work on the subject would include investigating in detail the phenomena of language mixing and code-switching in child bilinguals and focus on the stages of development in bilingual language acquisition. Another area that needs to be further investigated is the bilingual acquisition of children who are exposed to more than three languages.

9 References


**Other resources**

*Bilingual/Bicultural Family Network.*

*Bilingual Parenting in a Foreign Language.*

*Multilingual Children’s Association Web Forum.*

*Multilingual Family in the UK Web Forum.*

*The Bilingual Families Web Page.*
10 Appendices

Case studies

Below are three individual case studies of families where the parents are actively fostering bilingualism in their child(ren). The first two case studies, family A and family B, are of families whereby the ‘one person – one language’ strategy is adopted and correspond to Harding and Riley’s ‘Non-native parents’ type of situation (OPOL: Situation 3 in the paper). Families C and D have adopted the ‘minority language at home’ strategy and are also non-native speakers of the minority language. Family E had initially adopted the ‘one person – one language’ strategy but later switched to the ‘minority language at home’ strategy.

Case study: Family A [English, Japanese][OPOL]

This family reside in California, USA where the dominant community language is American English. Both mother and father have English as their native language and have two sons, Kenny and Andy. The mother, who is of mixed racial background (Japanese-English) and born and raised in the USA, has medium to high proficiency in Japanese, which she acquired in adulthood. The father is monolingual in American English. They decided to raise their children bilingually because they considered it a cultural and educational benefit for their child to be able to communicate using two languages. As the father spoke only the majority language, the OPOL strategy was naturally the only suitable pattern to be adopted (see section 6.1, OPOL: Situation 3).

When their first child, Kenny was born, the mother spoke to him in Japanese only and the father spoke English, and both parents communicated to each other in English.

At first, the mother found it strange and uncomfortable speaking to Kenny in Japanese, as she felt it somewhat unnatural to speak to her newborn in a language other than her native tongue but she persevered and after a few weeks she felt more accustomed to it. As she is a non-native speaker of Japanese, there were a few obstacles she had to overcome. She had not spoken Japanese for nearly 6 years prior to the birth of her first son and there were some words in Japanese that she did not know. As a result, she began to take note of these words as she came across them so
that she could later consult her dictionary (or her mother), thus increasing her own vocabulary.

When Kenny turned 4 months old (0:4), the mother returned to the working place full-time and he was left in the care of an English speaking monolingual childminder. The mother notes that between the ages of 1:0 and 1:6, Kenny only spoke a handful of words, most of which were English. When Kenny turned 1:6, the couple had another son, Andy, and the mother quit her job to stay at home full-time to become the primary carer. The mother observed that between the ages of 1:6 and 2:0, Kenny started to expand his vocabulary both in Japanese and in English and rapidly developed his speech skills. At age 2:0 he was capable of producing meaningful sentences in Japanese and in English.

As the two children receive more exposure from English, their exposure to Japanese is limited to their mother. However, the mother is also in an advantageous position as she is the primary carer. She creates a rich linguistic environment in Japanese by providing her children with books, videos, games and music tapes in Japanese as well as hiring Japanese-speaking childminders when required. She also attends Japanese cultural events and along with other Japanese-speaking families has formed a playgroup for Japanese-speaking children so that they would be able to interact with other children their own age in Japanese. She is also keeping up her own studies in Japanese and sometimes attends private lessons to increase her linguistic repertoire and improve her literacy skills in Japanese.

The mother consistently uses Japanese to the children but states that sometimes when she is tired or angry would sometimes say something in English. She observes that the older the children became, they started to talk and reply to her in English but she quickly realised her mistake and insisted that they use Japanese when speaking to her. A method she adopted was not responding to her children if they spoke to her in English. She notes how one of her friends thought it was a ‘cruel’ method but she said that she does not see it as being any different from insisting on politeness.

There were other obstacles that the family had to face. One difficulty was translating what had been said in Japanese into English for the benefit of the father or for any
other non-Japanese-speakers, which can be troublesome or tiring (for both parties), but she notes that the majority of people are very understanding of her situation and she has received a lot of support from family and friends. When in public, she also addresses the children in Japanese and is conscious of the fact that it may appear exclusive and rude to other people so she will usually explain to them that are speaking Japanese and excuse themselves first.

Kenny is now aged 4:0 and Andy, 2:6 and they speak both English and Japanese relatively well. The parents note that they sometimes use English words when speaking Japanese and Japanese words when speaking English but the mother acknowledges that these words seem to be words that they may not know the equivalent of in the other language and so she would provide them. In generally, they observe that there seems to be very little language mixing in their Japanese and English and that both their languages seem to be quite balanced and kept separate. The parents are very pleased with their language development so far, as their initial expectations of them acquiring Japanese were lower (and even more lower were the expectations of their friends and family).

When Kenny starts school (English-medium), they are aware that he will be exposed to a lot more English and so they will continue to try their best and maintain their bilingualism.

**Case study: Family B [German, English][OPOL]**

This German family reside in Germany. Both parents are German and their native language is German. The father has medium to high proficiency in English and the mother has a low to medium proficiency. When the couple were expecting their first child, they became interested in raising their children bilingually in English and German. They had a few friends who were already raising their children bilingually and who were convinced that the father’s English was proficient enough for the task. The couple considered it beneficial for the children to acquire both English and German as English is considered a major language of the world today and it was also required to learn a foreign language in school. They also felt that if their children were raised bilingually from birth, they would be able to pick English up much easier.
than they would from school. Another reason was that they hoped it would make their children more aware of other cultures and think of themselves as ‘world citizens’.

When their first child Philip was born, the father spoke to him solely in English and the mother spoke German. They decided to adopt the ‘one person – one language’ principle as the mother felt her spoken skills in English were lacking. When Philip was aged 2:9, the couple had a daughter, Sophie, and they continued with the OPOL strategy. As the mother was the primary carer and there were very few English-speaking families in the area where they lived, the children’s main source of English interaction was their father who worked full-time during the week. As a result German became their dominant language. Philip was able to speak English but would often use German words in his speech, his sister Sophie though she understood English, would reply in German. They would speak to each other in German. The family however provided the children with plenty of English language media such as books, video and audio tapes.

During the early stages, the father felt uncomfortable about speaking to his children English especially as it was not his native language and also because he felt very aware of making grammatical mistakes in English and didn’t wish to pass these mistakes on to his children but after a while he got used to it but notes that even now he would sometimes feel a little embarrassed about speaking to his children in English in public particularly around native-speakers of English. Another problem was the interference of some friends and family who sincerely believed that it would damage the development of their children and who he says ‘quoted pseudo-scientific sources […] but could never show me such books or articles’.

By the time Philip reached the age of 6 years, he seemed to enjoy speaking English. He spoke a lot more English and would avoid speaking German when addressing his father though sometimes he would make mistakes such as adopting German syntax when speaking English such as ‘Where go we?’ or ‘I like it not’. He would even translate sentences from German to English for his father whenever Sophie spoke to him. The parents note that this may be due to the fact that he was always praised by other family members, friends and anyone else who may be listening, whenever he
was heard to speak English. Around this time his sister, Sophie (aged 3:3), who still replied to her father in German, told him that she wanted to learn to speak English. Five months later, the family went on a trip to England and Wales for three weeks, which the parents claim was a turning point for the language development of their children. Philip became aware of how useful English was and would eagerly follow signs and instructions in English whenever they were in museums or other tourist attractions and would confidently talk to other children in English. During and after this holiday, the parents observed how Sophie would use more and more English words in her German when speaking to her father and was capable of following children’s films and books in English with more ease than before.

Case study: Family C [English, French][ML@H]

This family live in California, USA where the dominant community language is American English and both parents are native speakers of English. Both parents have high proficiency in French, both having studied it at second and third level institutes and each having spent some time in French-speaking countries (the mother spent one summer working in Brussels and the father lived in France for 2 years) and in general they are both very interested in foreign languages. When they were expecting their first child, they being non-native speakers did not feel confident enough to raise their child bilingually in French and English but after some encouragement from both their parents and support and advice from friends who were also raising bilingual children, they decided to raise their child in French. When their son, Jeremie, was born they decided to adopt the ‘minority language at home’ policy as they were both proficient speakers of French and they were completely confident that their child would pick up English outside the home from other family members and friends etc. Their own parents were happy that they decided to raise their child in French as they saw it as being educational (though they themselves didn’t speak French at all).

Like other parents speaking a non-native language to their child, they initially felt awkward and uncomfortable speaking to him in French but that quickly came to pass and after a year of speaking to him French, they found it strange to speak to him English. They even recall that sometimes they would accidentally speak French to other people’s young children. Even though they were both highly proficient French
speakers, they would find that some of their vocabulary was lacking in some areas so a dictionary was always kept handy. As Jeremie was constantly exposed to English from other family members, friends of the family etc. the parents provided him with audio and video tapes in French and read books in French to him in the hope that English wouldn’t over-dominate. As they were both non-native speakers, they were concerned about passing on their own mistakes to him such as grammatical errors and their non-native pronunciation, but nevertheless they considered any French that he would learn would be better than no French at all.

When Jeremie first started talking around the age of 1:0, his words were a mixture of both French and English. In particular, they note that he would use the French word for ‘ball’ but the English words for ‘hi’ and ‘bye’ and that he seemed to prefer these two English words and would often repeat them over and over again. After a while, when his language skills had developed a bit more he started using French words more often and it seemed evident that he understood a lot more in French than he did in English though there were some French words that he refused to speak (but understood) such as ‘livre’ and he would prefer to use the English ‘book’ instead. Although at this stage Jeremie’s French was more developed than his English, his parents were still concerned at this resistance to using these French words and would encourage him to use the French instead and after a few months he complied and only used the English words when speaking to other English-speakers.

When Jeremie was aged 2:0 he was speaking very clearly both in English and in French (though French was still dominant and the family had just spent a 2 month trip to France prior to his 2nd birthday). As the parents spoke only French to Jeremie and he would reply in French, they were unaware of how developed his speaking skills in English were until his 2nd birthday party where he communicated with his English-speaking relatives and friends in English using words that his parents didn’t even know he knew in English. It was at this time that the parents realised that he knew which language to use with each person. The mother expressed her surprise when she (in French) told Jeremie to thank someone for a present they had given him, she had expected him to say ‘merci’ and she would translate afterwards, but instead he said ‘thank you’ as he knew that he addressing an English-speaker.
Now at age 2:6, Jeremie is French-dominant and speaks exclusively in French to his parents and in English to English-speakers. He likes to talk about both the languages and enjoys listening to books being read to him sometimes in English and sometimes in French. The parents have been told by their English-speaking friends with English-speaking children the same age as Jeremie that he speaks English just as much as their children do and have also commented that he seems to speak more clearly than their own children and that he seems to pronounce his English words more carefully and deliberately.

**Case study: Family D [English, German][ML@H]**

Family D reside in the USA. Both parents are American and are native speakers of American English but have medium to high proficiency in German. The mother, when she was 6 years old, moved to Germany with her family for a period of 5 years where they still spoke English at home and where she learnt to speak German but when the family returned to the USA she stopped speaking German only to pick it up again when she started studying it at university. The father had also studied German at university. After they decided to start a family together, they both decided that they wanted to raise their children bilingually in English and in German. Through their studies of language acquisition at university they were convinced that they would be able to share their knowledge of German with their children even though they were non-native speakers. They decided to opt for the ‘minority language at home’ strategy, speaking German in the home within the family and English outside the home among other English-speakers.

At the beginning they felt strange speaking to their first child, Benjamin, in German but they started to feel more comfortable with the situation when he started to respond to them more when he was aged 0:8-0:10 (8-10 months). They spoke to him only in German and sang to him and told him stories only in German whereas he would be exposed to English from relatives and family friends. They also spoke to him in English sometimes if other English-speakers were around. When he started talking, he used a mixture of German and English words (about half and half) but the parents always encouraged him to use the German words as they were confident that living in an English dominant country, there would be plenty of opportunity to develop his
English later and as he began to develop his speaking skills they felt more and more comfortable and natural speaking together as a family in German. They read German books to him and bought many children’s video and audio tapes. They particularly feel that the cartoons and children’s films on video gave a strong positive influence over his German development.

Throughout his infancy, German was his dominant language. The parents noticed language mixing in the early stages of his life but notice that by the time he was aged 2:0, he found it easier to distinguish between the two languages and rarely mixed the languages. By age 3:0, he spoke both languages with ease though his spoken German was noticeably better than his English and he was perceived as having a near-native accent in German. His parents remember that at this age he was very aware of the different languages and usually when he discovered that someone spoke German, he would refuse to speak to him/her in English. It was clear that German was his dominant and preferred language and if his parents ever read him a book in English, he would always discuss the pictures in the book in German. He spoke English with his friends and also to his parents when his friends present and the parents note that he even had a slight German accent in his English and often used German syntax in his English, in particular ‘Where go we?’ . However they were not too concerned as they felt convinced that his English would improve once he started spending more time outside the home, in Kindergarten and school etc.

The couple now have five children in total, Ben now aged 7, two twin girls aged 5, another son aged 3 and young daughter aged 9 months and the family continue to use German at home. The twins when the were younger would speak in German as Ben would speak only German to them but now that Ben has entered school (English-medium), he has started speaking more English at home. As a result, the children usually communicate with each in English as they find it easier what with the wide range of resources and topics available in English and the diverse number of friends and family who speak English. Also for certain things such as homework, it is more appropriate to use English. When Ben comes home from school, he and his mother would discuss school in English and she would help him with his homework speaking English. After his school homework is finished, they would switch to German and his
mother provides him with exercises to do in German and they would continue to use German for the rest of the evening.

The parents believe that their English has not suffered as a result of raising them at home in German. They claim that although Ben’s English was good at ages 4-5 years but had a slight German accent and sometimes used German syntax, he became completely native-like by the time he was aged 5:10 with no perceived difference between his English and that of monolingual children. Their other children have had fewer problems with English, probably due to the fact that they have been exposed to more English than Ben had been when he was younger. The parents claim that the children enjoy speaking German and so far none of them have refused to speak it. They’ve maintained a ‘mostly German’ home and find that if any conversation is started in English, it usually continues and ends in German and they find it uncomfortable to maintain a long conversation in English. The children almost always address the parents in German, and when the parents are present they will also address each other in German but when they are alone, the children usually address each other in English. Interestingly the parents have noticed that when the eldest, Ben, is not around, the younger children would communicate using German and sometimes if one of them started using ‘too much English’ the other would reprimand him/her and insist on ‘Deutsch sprechen! (speak German!)’.

Case study: Family E [Norwegian, English][OPOL -> ML@H]

This family reside in Norway. The father is Norwegian and is a native-speaker of Norwegian but also has a high proficiency in English and the mother is American whose native language is American English and is proficient in Norwegian.

They adopted the OPOL strategy when their son, James, was born, each speaking their own native language. This strategy worked well for the first year and half and they recall that he appeared to understand both languages well and his first words were a mixture of English and Norwegian. When James was aged 1:6, the mother started studying at university and so James spent several hours a day, 4 days a week with a child minder who was primarily a monolingual Norwegian-speaker. When James was aged 1:10, the parents noticed that although he understood both languages
quite well, his spoken Norwegian was at a considerably higher level than his spoken English and so they decided to switch over to the ‘minority language at home’ strategy where both parents would communicate with their son in English only. After a few months, they noticed a rapid development in his linguistic ability. He started constructing more complex structures both in Norwegian and English and it seemed to the parents that his English had greatly improved and was on par with his Norwegian. The parents note that he initially mixed his languages but as the languages developed there was less mixing. They still follow the ‘minority language at home’ rule but sometimes the father would code-switch according to a particular situation and the mother would always use English except when they are in the presence of non-English speakers. James is now aged 4 and attends preschool. His parents would often read him books in English and have also provided him with videos in English which he enjoys. The parents are happy with his language development and they do not regret the change in strategy as it exposes him to more of the minority language. They are confident that as he grows older he will be able to maintain his bilingualism as they note that English enjoys high esteem where they live and they have received positive support from the community and their families.