

VOICES OF AMI TRAINING

The Development of the Bilingual Child in the First Three Years of Life

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Bilingualism/multilingualism is the ability to speak more than one language. It is believed that the bilingual population is greater than that of monolinguals globally. When a child is provided the opportunities to learn a second language, it is like giving them a key to another world and expanding their horizons and opportunities. In terms of a child living in a bilingual environment, the language absorption and acquisition periods will be longer. It is important to consider language consistency as well as respect for the child's developmental milestones.

The benefits of bilingualism in the short and long term are well known. Some of the benefits:

- Cognitive development [1]
- Longer attention periods
- Improves attention and concentration.
- Decision-making (in which language to respond, which word to use)
- Helps socio-cultural adaptation.
- Helps prevent or delay diseases such as Alzheimer's and dementia

The absorbent mind and the sensitive periods are present in the first plane of development. When the child is immersed in a bilingual/multilingual environment as part of their daily life, they have the potential to acquire and develop these languages as their first language.

We must be clear that there are slight differences between the first language, native language, mother tongue, and dominant language [2], which seem to be the same, but each has its characteristics.

But how can we define bilingualism since being bilingual goes beyond speaking more than one language? Apart from learning and expressing in different languages, it also entails a socio-emotional component that, in turn, helps the children adapt to their time and place.

We can define bilingual individuals as:

- A person who is fluent in two languages.
- A person who expresses best in one language but uses both languages frequently and without difficulty.
- A person who uses two languages to communicate.

Considering the power of the absorbent mind and the sensitive periods, the **constant interaction** between the child, the environment, and the adult is undoubtedly essential for the development of the bilingual child.

There are different approaches to bilingualism, the most common being **OPOL (one parent, one language most commonly used in our environments)**, **MLAH (Minority Language at Home)**, or **T&P (Time and Place)**. Each of these approaches has pros and cons. Still, they all share the importance of bonding, the quantity and quality of language in the environment, and the importance of repetition and consistency of the adults.

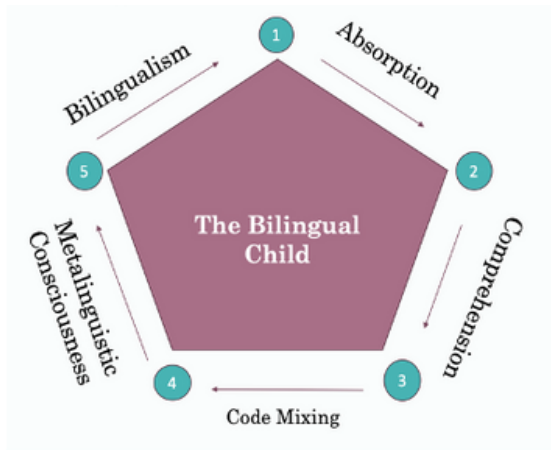
The child must be immersed in a rich bilingual environment where the adults are the main resources. It is essential that the adults in the environment each use their languages consistently. We must consider that each child lives uniquely. Bilingual development is impacted by the socio-cultural aspects in which the child develops. However, we must take into account that there are **different types of bilingualism**:

- **Coordinated** – Acquire both languages in parallel. Use both languages independently. Generally, it develops when each adult speaks a specific language with the child.
- **Compound** – Acquisition of two languages, but even the child cannot differentiate between one language and the other.
- **Additive** – When the environment offers second language acquisition as cultural enrichment, e.g., schools with bilingual programs.
- **Subtractive or Substitutive** – Need to acquire another language to become part of the new place of residence, e.g., immigrants and refugees.

Having cleared the different types of bilingualism and the stages of bilingualism, it is obvious that **immersion environments are much more efficient than bilingual programs** because the child constantly hears both languages, and the ears and the brain get used to switching from one language to another.

Stages of Bilingualism

Just as there are phases to a child's spoken language development, there are also different stages in bilingual development. Once we are clear on these phases and consider the importance of repetition, consistency, and being constant, without neglecting the importance of emotional development that goes hand in hand with the desire to communicate with others, we can witness the bilingual child's development.



- **Absorption** begins to absorb languages from the environment.
- **Comprehension** is broader than expression.
- **Code Mixing** [3] begins to be expressed by mixing languages and still needs to distinguish one language from the other.
- **Metalinguistic awareness** is when the child can differentiate between languages.
- **Bilingualism** is when the child easily understands and expresses in both languages.

It is also important to consider that different areas of the brain play a fundamental role in favouring the bilingual brain process:

- Broca's Area and Wernicke's Area (speech production and comprehension) constantly activated when switching languages.
- Frontal cortex, responsible for attention and working memory.
- Auditory Cortex processes and interprets speech-related auditory stimuli.
- Hippocampus related to learning and remembering vocabulary.
- Basal ganglia also contribute to learning and memory.

How do we support the development of the bilingual child?

- Constant presence, communication, and consistency on the part of the adult.
- Name every object, action, and emotion when interacting with the child.
- Remember the importance of sensory experiences connected to language.
- Keep exposure to linguistic and cultural diversity, especially in the first plane of development.
- Importance of repetition, time, and opportunities.
- Faith in the child
- Remember that each child has his rhythm and process of reception and manifestation.
- Create an environment of respect for different forms of expression.

Conclusion

We do not teach languages in the first plane of development. The child absorbs and acquires languages around them and further develops their languages. They not only acquire the languages but will also connect with other individuals in their lives. Therefore, the development of bilingual children indirectly allows them to extend their socio-emotional and cultural circle, where they often become the connector of their own cultural identity.

REFERENCES & FURTHER READING

[1] Bilinguals also show some cognitive advantages. In particular, bilinguals appear to perform a little bit better than monolinguals on tasks that involve switching between activities and inhibiting previously learned responses (Bialystok, Craik, & Luk, 2012).

[2] Mother tongue is the in-born language, which a baby has already familiarised even in the gestation of mother before it was born. The first language is the language which a child acquires either through schooling or socialisation, such as family.

[3] Code mixing—the use of elements from two different languages in the same sentence or conversation—is a normal part of being bilingual and interacting with other bilingual speakers (Poplack, 1980).

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gabriela Velázquez's Montessori journey began as a child. Her mother was a Montessori teacher, so she grew up attending Montessori schools in México. It was only natural that upon reaching adulthood that she also decided to pursue a career in Montessori education. After completing her degree in Early Childhood Education, she earned the AMI Assistance to Infancy diploma. She would go on to work for more than 20 years in Montessori schools in México and the United States.

Gabriela completed the demanding AMI Training of Trainers program to become an AMI Trainer at the level of 0–3 Assistants to Infancy. She has worked on 0–3 teacher-training courses in Argentina, China, Mexico, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Taiwan and USA. She serves as a lecturer, consultant and examiner and Director of Training for AMI

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