

Myths and misconceptions about language development in multilingual children:
A short evidence briefing for early years practitioners and policy-makers

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1. Introduction

According to the 2011 Census, as many as 39% of primary school children in the UK speak English as an additional language. It is crucial then that early years professionals (e.g. nursery staff, health visitors) are capable of giving honest, accurate advice to parents and to other professionals about what we might expect of these children in terms of development, expectations, and readiness for school.

This document details and debunks a number of misconceptions that early years staff sometimes have with regard to multilingual language development. These should be targeted, and corrected, in training material for early years practitioners.

Multilingual children are defined as children who are exposed to English and to one or more additional languages (henceforth called home languages) either simultaneously from birth or successively.

1. Multilingual language learning is neither quick nor effortless

There is a widespread belief that children can learn a second or third language quickly and effortlessly. Therefore, there is often an expectation that children should make rapid progress and should catch up with monolingual (single language learning) children of the same age after a few months of exposure to a new language

It is true that age of exposure to a second language is a significant predictor of ultimate attainment, especially when it comes to sounding like a native speaker. It is also true that children do have an advantage over adults in this [1].

Nevertheless, longitudinal studies of immigrant children over a number of years have consistently shown that it takes these second language learners years to achieve the language standards of monolingual children [2]. *It is consequently unreasonable to expect that children who have only been exposed to English for a few months will have language skills comparable to their monolingual peers.*

2. The speed of language acquisition depends on the amount of input children receive in each language

No two multilingual children will be alike, even those learning the same two languages. This is because different children receive different amounts of input, as well as input of differing quality. This will ultimately affect their rate of development in both English and their first language.

In general, even children who have a relatively balanced exposure to two languages (i.e. hear each language roughly 50% of the time) typically have smaller vocabularies than monolingual children of the same age in each of their languages. Some studies suggest that multilinguals need to hear a language 60% or more of the time in order to mirror the attainment of monolinguals in that language. [3][4]. *So, when trying to work out if a child is delayed in a particular language, it is important first to discover how much exposure they have had to that language* (you can download a Language Exposure Questionnaire at <http://www.psy.plymouth.ac.uk/babylab/leq/>).

However, there is also evidence that, when you sum the number of words that children know across their two languages, the size of these children's total conceptual vocabulary (i.e. the sum of the concepts for which they have words in either language) is comparable to the size of the vocabulary of monolingual peers. This is because children may learn some words in one language (e.g. fork, spoon) and other words in another (e.g. circle time, painting). *Therefore, an alternative way to measure the language development of a multilingual child is to sum how many unique words the child knows in both languages combined.*

3. Code-switching is an integral part of the multilingual language experience

Switching between languages in the same conversation, or even in the same sentence (code-switching), is a common behaviour for both multilingual children and adults. Sometimes this mixing is perceived as a sign of confusion or of linguistic incompetence. *However, decades of research on both children's and adults' code-switching have now shown that multilingual speakers are anything but confused.*

The reasons why children and adults code-switch are numerous and systematic and include, but are not limited to, assessment of the listener's language knowledge (switching to a language the listener knows better), the (non-) existence of translation equivalents across their two languages (an idea may be expressed better in one language than another), and lexical gaps (switching because you know the word in one language not another) [5, 6]. *This means that code-switching is a sophisticated strategy that requires a wealth of linguistic knowledge; the exact opposite of linguistic confusion.*

4. Maintaining the home language is important

English is the language of schooling, and it is crucial for academic success. It is therefore understandable that parents of multilingual children should be concerned about their children's English skills. Unfortunately this may mean that parents sometimes decide to stop speaking the home language and favour the use of English instead.

The evidence shows that dropping the home language is not advisable. This is partly because the parent's own English may not be of good enough quality to support the child's English learning. When non-native speakers use English with their children, these children do not have better English than children whose parents use their mother tongue [7]. In fact, the opposite is true; interacting with a large number of different native (non-English) speakers in a variety of contexts (e.g. in nursery, with the childminder, with family members, with older children) is so beneficial that it can have a positive impact on a child's language skills in all their languages [8].

At the same time, maintaining a linguistic and cultural identity, and fostering relationships with members of the extended family, are important reasons for speaking the home language. In addition, home language use can have additional cognitive and linguistic benefits for multilingual children [9] including the transfer of literacy skills from the home language to the language of schooling [10]. *Thus, home language and English can happily co-exist and feed off each other in a mutually beneficial relationship.*

5. How to deal with language impairment in multilingual children

All too often, parents of multilingual children who may have language and communication difficulties are advised by well-intentioned professionals to drop the home language. This is almost certainly not good advice. *Being multilingual does not appear to put children at a particular advantage or disadvantage when it comes to language impairment* [11] [12].

There have been no studies to date on the frequency of language impairment in multilingual children, but it is logical to expect that the prevalence of language impairment will be the same as in monolingual children, approximately 7% of the child population [13]. We also know that language impairment will affect both languages of a multilingual child, and that developmental language impairment manifests itself early on in the acquisition process. Children who have a developmental language impairment will be slow babblers and slow word learners, although please note that not all slow word learners have a language impairment.

However, the diagnosis of language impairment in multilingual children is a challenge for professionals in the absence of assessment tools standardized on multilingual populations [14]. *The advice to parents and teachers who may be concerned about the atypical development of a multilingual child is:*

- a. *Closely observe the child's communication skills, including gestures, with particular attention to comprehension.* Children with good comprehension skills are likely to have a better prognosis when they have language impairment.
- b. *Evaluate the child's language skills in the context of the amount of language exposure.* If a child is hardly exposed to English it is only to be expected that her skills in the language will be minimal. If however the child also has very limited skills in the home language despite extensive exposure, then referral to a speech and language therapist may be warranted.

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