

The bilingual edge: why, when, and how to teach your child a second language.

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One particular view of and response to globalization has centered on competitiveness. *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman (2006, p. 340) has famously called on Americans to “get ready to compete, get every individual to think about how he or she can upgrade his or her educational skills, and keep investing in the secrets of America’s sauce.” Perhaps unsurprisingly, it was only a matter of time when bilingualism was going to be touted as an ingredient in the competitive sauce, as *The Bilingual Edge* does. *The Bilingual Edge* is a self-help book for parents who want to raise their children bilingually. In contrast to most other such guides on the market, this book is not exclusively directed at intercultural couples and migrant parents but also at monolingual majority parents who may want to raise their children bilingually. As the authors assert “with the right foundation of knowledge, any parent can raise a child who knows more than one language, even if that parent is monolingual” (p. 20). To me, this is one of a number of baffling premises the book is based on. Surely, “the right foundation of knowledge” includes knowing the language you want to teach your child. Not so. *The Bilingual Edge* contains numerous anecdotes about people such as Kristen and Miguel:

[...] Kristen and Miguel have a three-year-old son, Lucas. Both Kristen and Miguel are native speakers of English, and although they know some Spanish, they are still at the beginner level. Thinking about their own difficulties learning a second language later in life, and hoping to give their son both an appreciation for language and a head start in his education, they would like to raise their son to be as proficient in as many languages as possible. For this reason, they take Lucas, now four, to a Japanese class every Saturday and to a Spanish-only playgroup every day after school for two hours. In addition, they have a Tagalog-speaking babysitter each Tuesday. (p. 226)

Kristen and Miguel's efforts seem almost comically over the top. Why would they want to go to such lengths? The reasons – “why [...] two languages [are] better than one” – are explained in Section One. These include a cognitive edge; enhanced cross-cultural understanding; different cultural perspectives; enriched family life, culture, and communication; and an educational and career edge. If the basic premise of the book that bilingualism per se is better than monolingualism is true, then all choices in the great language supermarket are obviously equally valid, and that is where the next section comes in with its advice on how to choose the right combination of languages. The authors offer exercises to assess language use at three levels: the family, the community, and internationally (i.e. by most widely spoken languages). Once language choice is in place, the question is when to start introducing the second language. Chapter 4 presents a solid overview of first language acquisition and then describes second language learning and teaching strategies for three age groups: bilingual from birth (0-2); preschool second language learners (3-4); and school-age second language learners (5 and up).

The next chapter deals with individual differences such as birth order, gender, personality or aptitude. Chapter 6 is devoted to language learning in the home and provides good advice on engaging children in meaningful interactions, reading to them and immersing them in the language for three types of families: majority language families, i.e. both parents are English speakers and “each has a smattering of other languages” (p. 100); mixed language families, where “at least one parent is proficient in a language other than the majority language” (p. 105); and minority language families, where both parents are migrants. The chapter ends with a “family language audit” exercise that will help determine both the quantity and quality of the language input received by a child over the course of a day.

Chapter 7 is devoted to the use of edutainment resources such as TV, videos, the internet or bilingual toys to support language learning. Chapter 8 deals with language support outside the home, particularly how to find a language school, language summer camp or tutor and how to identify whether the program is of good quality. The authors strongly recommend two-way bilingual immersion programs but are realistic about their limited availability in the USA.

The four chapters in the final Section of the book deal with problems that might arise in bilingual parenting. Chapter 9 asks “What if my child mixes and switches languages?” This is a very useful chapter in that it may help to lower anxiety levels created by unrealistic expectations. The next chapter offers suggestions on how to deal with advice – mostly from health and child care professionals – to stop using the minority language at home. Very sensibly, the authors suggest to “get ready to simply ignore such well-meaning suggestions and remarks” (p. 215). Chapter 11

is devoted to trilingualism and the use of non-standard varieties in the language mix. Finally, the last chapter offers advice on how to deal with children who resist learning (or speaking) a language other than English, how to deal with skeptical grandparents, divorce and other changes of circumstance.

The Bilingual Edge is an expression of a particular set of parenting and linguistic ideologies. It is informed by a view that parenting is competitive and that bilingual parenting is a way to make children more competitive because bilingualism is supposed to confer a cognitive advantage. The assumption of the cognitive edge of bilinguals is based mostly on the work of Ellen Bialystok (2001) who, along with other psycholinguists, has found that bilingual children demonstrate metalinguistic awareness (e.g., that a thing stays the same if you change its label) earlier than monolingual children or that bilingual children are more creative than monolingual children (e.g., as measured by how many ideas they have about what you could do with an empty water bottle). The evidence for enhanced metalinguistic awareness in a group of comparable bilinguals and monolinguals is rock-solid. However, there are two problems with applying the findings from psycholinguistic experiments to “the real world” and presenting them as fact to parents.

The first is that very few parents would consider the actual research finding worth a significant investment: the actual finding is that bilingual children do better on grammaticality judgments of sentences that don’t make sense – i.e. they are more likely to judge a sentence such as “In which bed does the spoon sleep?” as grammatically acceptable and not get distracted by the nonsensical content. Now, this is great, but I’d be surprised if any real-world parent could be bothered to invest in bilingual parenting if this is all they are going to get for their efforts. As a consequence,

we need to extrapolate from experiments such as these and they need to be accepted as standing for much more: cognitive advantage and academic success, and that is exactly what the authors claim: “Knowing a second language [...] enhances creativity and academic success” (p. 252). It’s a long bow.

What makes the claim that bilinguals have a cognitive edge over their monolingual peers and that they experience enhanced academic success much more than an innocuous exaggeration is related to the second problem I see with drawing “real-world conclusions” from psycholinguistic experiments such as the ones mentioned above. That second problem has to do with the fact that in the real world bilingual and monolingual children (and adults) hardly ever differ on this variable alone as they do in a carefully controlled experiment. Rather, monolingualism or bilingualism intersect with other aspects of a person’s identity. In the USA, monolingualism in Standard American English tends to intersect with being native-born, middle-class, well-educated and White while bilingualism tends to intersect with being a migrant, working-class, poor and non-White. I don’t need to point out which group is more successful academically and on any other measure of social inclusion. Outside the psycholinguistic laboratory, bilinguals as a group are less academically successful than monolinguals – not because of their bilingualism but because of the ways in which bilingualism frequently intersects with various forms of disadvantage. I believe it is this contradiction that we need to bring out into the open to effect positive change for bilinguals rather than pretending it does not exist. Look at the following piece of advice:

So, if you are a native speaker of a so-called nonstandard variety of a language,

you should not worry that your child will have difficulties when she enters school and begins using the standard variety. Research suggests this is simply not the case. (p. 232)

I don't know which research the authors are referring to (they don't cite any). But I do wonder how they could have missed that basic of sociolinguistics that – in a wide range of contexts – non-standard speakers face considerable disadvantage in formal schooling? Could they really have missed *Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School Children et al. v. Ann Arbor School District* or *Lau v. Nichols* and the decades-old debate around African American Vernacular English and second language speakers in US schooling? I find the statement that research does not show any evidence for non-standard speakers having difficulties when they enter school – particularly, coming as it does from two respected academic linguists – incomprehensible.

I think it is laudable when academic linguists make the effort to reach out to a wider audience and as such I commend the authors' effort. However, ultimately I feel that they have actually done a disservice to many bilinguals. As a profession we need to be able to transcend the binary logic that bilingualism is either good or bad. Bilingualism as such does not exist and it plays out differently in the lives of different people in different contexts. It is “a set of resources which circulate in unequal ways in social networks and discursive spaces, and whose meaning and value are socially constructed within the constraints of social organizational processes, under specific historical conditions” (Heller, 2007, p. 2). Popularizing bilingualism in a way that suggests it is necessarily good is likely to raise the question why – if bilingualism is so beneficial – so many migrants are not able to realize those supposed benefits. It places the blame for failing

– for failing to realize the supposed “edge” – squarely on the shoulders of individuals and migrant communities when it is monolingual societies that set them up for failure. In many US schools speaking a language other than English in class or even during break time constitutes grounds for suspension (Hill 2008). I don’t see how any amount of fun attitude – a key “how-to” advice of the book – to bilingualism in the home can overcome such a powerful message that bilingualism is not desirable and not valued. Even where schools do not present actual obstacles, the support for bilingual children in American schools (and in many other countries around the world) is laughable. However, individual efforts at language maintenance without institutional support are ultimately limited (Kim, 2007).

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