

# How Children Learn a Second Language

In the 1970s, my early childhood provider advised my immigrant Mexican American mother to stop speaking Spanish with me at home. They were concerned because, as a 2 year old, I was not as verbal as my peers. Worried that she was causing me harm, my mother immediately stopped speaking to me in Spanish.

I was not alone in this experience. Back then, it was a common assumption that exposure to more than one language would confuse young children and could lead to developmental delays (Espinosa, 2008; Tabors, 2008). Research on dual language development has grown substantially since the 1970s. Information on the dual language process and the numerous benefits for young children is now more readily available. My experience and the experience of many other children of immigrants highlight the importance of providing parents with up-to-date, high quality research so they can make the best decisions for their children.

## How Do Children Learn a Second Language?

In general, there are two ways in which children may learn a second language: simultaneously or sequentially (McLaughlin et al., 1995; Tabors, 2008).

### Simultaneous Second Language Learning

Simultaneous learners include children under the age of 3 who are exposed to two languages at the same time. These children may include those who are exposed to one language by parents at home and another language by providers in their early childhood program. Simultaneous learners are also young children whose parents each speak separate languages to them at home (e.g., mother speaks Spanish to child, father speaks Chinese to child).

Before 6 months of age, simultaneous learners learn both languages at similar rates and do not prefer one language over the other. This is because they build separate but equally strong language systems in their brains for each of the languages they hear. These separate systems allow children to learn more than one language without becoming confused. In fact, the pathways infants develop in their brains for each of the languages they hear are similar to the single pathway developed by children who are only exposed to English.

At 6 months, children begin to notice differences between languages and may begin to prefer the language they hear more. This means that parents must be careful to provide similar amounts of exposure to both languages; otherwise, children may begin to drop vocabulary of the language to which they are less exposed (Espinosa, 2008; Kuhl, 2004; Kuhl et al., 2006; Tabors, 2008).

### Cognitive Benefits of Simultaneous Language Development

There are many cognitive benefits for young children who are simultaneously exposed to more than one language. For example, they have greater neural activity and denser tissue in the areas of the brain related to memory, attention, and language than monolingual learners. These indicators are associated with long-term positive cognitive outcomes for children (Bialystok 2001, Mechelli et al., 2004; Kovelman, Baker, & Petitto, 2006).

### Sequential Second Language Learners

Sequential learners include children who have become familiar with one language, but are then introduced or required to learn a second language. The classic example of sequential learning is when a non-English speaking child enters an English-dominant classroom.

Unlike simultaneous language learning, sequential learning of languages can occur at any age and can be influenced by factors like the child's temperament or motivation.

## The Four Stages of Sequential Second Language Learning

### Stage I: Home Language Use

For the first few days, children may persist in using their first or native language even if others do not understand them.

### Stage II: Silent Period

After children realize their first language is not working, they enter a silent period in which they barely speak and rely heavily on nonverbal means to communicate with others. The younger the child, the longer the silent period may last.

### Stage III: Telegraphic & Formulaic Speech

Children will start to speak in the new or second language. In this stage, they will only speak in small utterances (e.g., Me Down) or by repeating the words of others.

### Stage IV: Productive Language

Children are now ready to express their own thoughts and construct their own sentences. In the beginning, these sentences may be very basic or grammatically incorrect; however, this improves over time.

Parents of dual language learners should not be alarmed if their children exhibit any of the above behaviors (e.g., silent period). These behaviors are common for children who are learning a second language. Also, research has found that children who begin to learn a second language before the age of 6 or 7 are more able to speak the new language like a native speaker than children who didn't start

until after ages 6 or 7 (Bongaerts, 2005).

## The Multiple Benefits of Learning More Than One Language

Research strongly supports the benefits of bilingualism in language, literacy, social, and cognitive development. For example, bilingual children have performed better than monolingual speakers on measures of analytical ability, concept formation, cognitive flexibility, and metalinguistic skills (Espinosa, 2008; Hakuta, Ferdman, & Diaz, 1987; Roseberry-McKibbin & Brice, 2005).

While some teachers and parents believe that in order to succeed academically in the U.S. all children must learn English as quickly as possible, research demonstrates just the opposite. In fact, evidence suggests that children who continue to learn academic concepts in their native language while gradually learning English outperform academically and socially children who are immersed in English-only programs (Chang et al., 2007; Restrepo & Kruth, 2003).

## How Can Parents Support Dual Language Development?

- Ensure that the environments in which you introduce languages to children are nurturing—whether it is a school, early childhood program, or home (Tabors, 2008).
- Choose an education program that is accepting and supportive of dual language learning.
- If your child is learning a second language sequentially, select a program that allows children to continue to learn academic concepts in their native language as they gradually learn the second or new language (Copple & Bredekamp, 2008).
- Volunteer your time and/or skills in your child's classroom. This would allow dual language learners the opportunity to communicate in their home language during the day.
- Teach vocabulary or nursery rhymes in your native language to the class or teachers, extending opportunities to practice a second language to all children (Espinosa, 2008).
- Be prepared for the possibility that your children will express disinterest in their native language. Support your children's interest in maintaining their native language by talking to them about the importance of dual language development.
- Create fun family-oriented activities that will provide opportunities to converse in the home language, such as reading books, singing songs, or playing games together.
- Bring children to activities in which the demand to speak the home language is high, such as in extended family or community gatherings (Tabors, 2008).

Parents play a crucial role in supporting their children's dual language development. It is a misconception that children are just "natural" learners who effortlessly store and maintain knowledge of languages. Dual language development requires the conscious effort, reinforcement, and support of parents, teachers, and family members (Tabors, 2008).

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