Bilingual First Language Acquisition: Processes, Pitfalls & Promises

Andrew Reimann, Jacob Schnickel

Introduction

The following survey of bilingual first language acquisition (BFLA) is written from two perspectives, first as English educators and second as parents of children growing up bilingually using English and Japanese. As educators, the experience of experimental methodology and materials design is balanced with parental hope and concern. The common denominator in both of these views is the commitment and support towards helping young people learning languages.

The goal of this paper is to combine both perspectives, educator and parent, and consider what can be learned from children, students, and those who have grown up using and learning English and Japanese. To accomplish this, two studies will be described. The first is a longitudinal case study of four children with varying experiences, contexts, and personalities. The second involves a survey gauging bilingual experiences, strategies, benefits and challenges growing up with English and Japanese. The survey was administered to children who now speak both languages and can be considered bilingual. From the survey results, the reflections of childhood experience, and the researcher's own observations, a diverse and complete path to bilingualism will be described.

The ultimate purpose of theses studies is to share some suggestions that will be instructive to parents who are raising their children to be bilingual or educators who are supporting children in learning a second language. Examining the process with hindsight, it is possible to reflect on what worked and what did not and consider successes and failures objectively and without bias.

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Literature Review

Bilingual First Language Acquisition is a natural process, the origins of which are as old as language itself. As long as there have been different dialects and ways of communicating, it has been necessary for others to learn them. Simply from an evolutionary or survival instinct perspective the more languages a person knows the better she can connect, collaborate, adapt and be successful. This has always been true, and in the age of translation software and AI is even more essential. Multilingual competence or bilingualism is more than just a diverse range of communication tools; it is a means of opening another way of thinking, a different worldview, perspective, and new way of being. Learners who are exposed to two languages at the same time are naturally, and innately, able to process develop, and use these languages to adapt to their changing world, intuitively and flexibility, while greatly expanding their ability to learn, interact and communicate.

This paper aims to explore and shed light on some of the many myths, worries, pitfalls and challenges surrounding BFLA, including questions of language proficiency, cultural bias, social acceptance, relationship struggles and even personal identity crisis. The purpose is to highlight the benefits of bilingualism, while providing advice and guidance for parents, educators, and learners on how to overcome challenges by dispelling common misconceptions and sharing success stories.

Bilingualism is one of the greatest gifts a multilingual family can give to a child. The research and experiences presented will describe how bilingual learners can excel at both languages and overcome difficulties. Results from a survey of bilingual learners at various stages of education combined with longitudinal data provide a clear picture of the promise of bilingualism. In conclusion, by combining personal experiences, academic research, and data collected from bilingual first language acquisition learners, practical recommendations, and insights to empower others to raise and support bilingual children effectively will be suggested.

Although the command of multiple languages has clear benefits and advantages, bilingualism as it occurs in young children, has often been corre-

lated with deficiencies and negative effects in other areas of child development. Early studies claimed that bilingual children had lower IQ's and were limited in their potential linguistic, cognitive, and social development compared to monolingual children (Smith, F. 1923). Initial research suggested that bilingual children had developmental disorders and generally had lower levels of language ability in either language. These studies, however, tended to overlook the diversity of contexts and participants, overgeneralizing variables and limiting research to simple studies, conducted in only one language that could not be replicated or reinforced by longitudinal support. More recent studies that have cast wider nets, considered more diverse variables, and have considered contextual analysis over time, as well as attitudes and motivation. These have subsequently found conclusively that BFLA has only positive influences on young learners. For example Taylor, (1974) concluded that, although monolingual children appear to have a greater command of one language at early stages, bilingual children tended to achieve higher levels of cognitive and linguistic development at an earlier age and with less difficulty than monolinguals. One such test (Ianco & Warel 1977) asked children to differentiate between three words and state which ones were most similar. An example of the words provided were "cap", "can" and "hat". Bilinguals more often than monolinguals answered that "cap" and "hat" were most similar, suggesting that bilingual children focused more on a word's meaning and semantic difference than its sound. Bilingual children were also less likely to make semantic overgeneralizations like calling all four-legged animals "dogs" than monolingual children. These observations also suggest that bilingual children have an increased flexibility and fewer inhibitions when perceiving the environment and various contexts. Bilingual children's advanced level of metalinguistic awareness allows them to look at language rather than through it. This ability is an essential precursor to the development of complex understanding such as abstract thought, problem solving and the attainment of other, higher levels of cognition (Vygotsky, L. S. 1935).

Early claims that children confuse languages and cannot differentiate words or rules were also unfounded. Children will imitate speakers and associ-

ate those speakers with a particular language and context. Using a language out of context or with a non-speaker will result in communication failure, which can be frustrating for the child (Amberg, L. 1987). Through this kind of learning and negative reinforcement, the bilingual child will quickly learn the rules and processes of discourse that are language specific (Abudarham, S. 1987). Nevertheless, all bilingual children go through a critical separation period in which they frequently mix languages. This is more of a communication strategy like code switching or a form of experimental learning rather than confusion or linguistic deficiency.

Genesee (2015) reviewed four persisting myths critical of early bilingualism: 1) that children have monolingual brains, 2) that younger is better, 3) that time on task learning languages is the most significant variable, and 4) that there is a correlation between early bilingualism and developmental disorders. In regard to the claim that children have monolingual brains and can only handle or process one language at a time, perceived issues included, limited capacity for language, difficulty separating languages, smaller lexicon, and delay in reaching developmental stages. Although short-term examples, for this can be observed in some bilinguals between age one and three, after age four bilingual children tend to exceed monolingual's communicative capacity, and there is no significant difference in developmental stages. The second prevailing myth is that younger is better. Younger children do have more flexible brains as described in the critical period hypothesis; however, language development is not linear and factors such as length of exposure, attitudes and motivation of children or parents is a more influential variable than age of onset alone. The third criticism relates to the effects of time on task, in particular that it is impossible to learn or be exposed to languages equally. Although this is true, and most people do develop a dominant language, linguistic skills do transfer between lexicons and variables influencing proficiency such as attitude or the role of language in daily life either (minority or majority language) are both more critical and difficult to measure. These variables would also need to be considered over time in longitudinal studies to be significant. Finally, the myth that bilingualism can cause or exacerbate developmental disorders such as

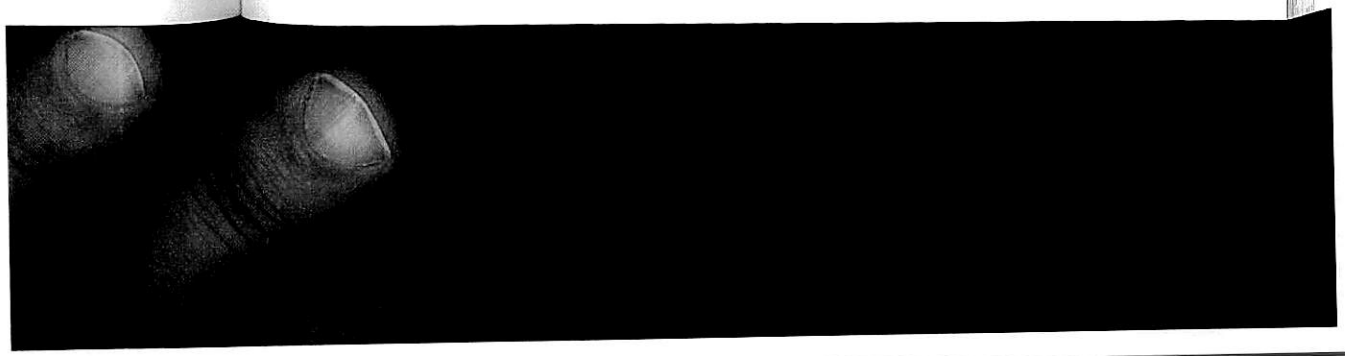
ADHD, autism or dyslexia is unfounded. The relationship between language and cognition is very complex; therefore any correlation between proficiency level and disability is at best problematic, impossible, and insignificant. The causes and effects of bilingualism are diverse and vary according to the individual and context. It is impossible to generalize other than describing the overwhelming positive effects experienced by all bilinguals (Genesee, 2015).

As Genesse (2015) points out, it is well documented that BFLA has clear benefits and that early fears of developmental deficiencies are insignificant. Multilingual competence is not only a powerful communication tool providing a diverse range of communication styles, but the methods, strategies and successes of bilingual language learning can be applied to language learning in general. Children raised bilingually and biculturally consistently demonstrate expanded worldview, perspective, and global opportunities, improved communicative competence, sensitivity and awareness, advanced abstract thinking, more expressive over referential communication, developed linguistic and cognitive skills and a heightened sensitivity and overall cultural and metalinguistic awareness (Reimann, 2001, 2002). These are all goals of formal second language learning; therefore understanding the processes of bilingual language acquisition can positively impact how we learn and teach language in the classroom.

To conduct valid research, it is important to distinguish bilingualism from the individual child, learning language from parents naturally and in context, from the early acquisition of two languages simultaneously in an immersion style classroom. The term "bilingual first language acquisition" refers to the process of learning two languages simultaneously from birth or early infancy. This is distinct from learning a second or foreign language later in life because it occurs during the period of critical development.

In the context of the current paper, BFLA is viewed as a highly desirable outcome for parents who speak different languages and wish to have their children develop fluency in both.

During the critical period, when a child's brain is particularly receptive to the process of language learning and use, there is a standard progression from



babbling to recognizable words to vocabulary expansion to structures with increasing syntactic complexity (Paradise, Genesee, & Crago, 2011). Bilingual first language acquisition follows the same pattern, and children are capable of reaching milestones in two languages learned simultaneously (Genesee, 1989). This means that there are no physiological barriers to effectively learning two languages rather than one.

Parental use of language will be an important factor in a child's language development. This is true for children who learn to speak only one language, and it is true for children who learn to speak two languages. As De Houwer (2007) indicates, however, the rate of success for children who become bilingual is 75%. What accounts for the 25% who do not become bilingual? Once believed to be the best approach to ensuring bilingualism among children, the one-parent-one-language model seems now to be inadequate, as pointed out by De Houwer (2007) and Byers-Heinlein & Lew-Williams (2013). The basic principle, consistent exposure to both languages, cannot be faulted, but it is not sufficient. Pearson (2007) explains that "quantity of input" in the minority language is the most important factor in determining whether or not a child will become bilingual.

Parents may have concerns about raising bilingual children, including those related to mixing languages, delayed linguistic development, and confusion about which language to use. Byers-Heinlein & Lew-Williams (2013) describe the mixing of languages in a single sentence as an indication of a child's "ingenuity" rather than one of confusion. Based on their review of literature on bilingualism, Hoff & Core (2013) write that overall linguistic development in bilingual children is similar to or faster than it is in monolingual children. However, this development is distributed over two languages, such that bilingual children may trail behind their monolingual peers on certain measures, such as reading comprehension, grammatical development, and vocabulary size. Byers-Heinlein & Lew-Williams (2013) state that the use of a monolingual assessment on a bilingual child is likely to yield "false evidence of delay" (p. 106). Countering the notion that children may become confused when exposed to multiple languages at an early age, Bosch and Sebastián-Gal-

lés (2001) show that four-month-old infants were able to distinguish between Spanish and Catalan. Thus, it seems clear that parents need not worry about confusion or delays in children growing up with two languages.

Parents hoping their children will speak more than one language will likely have some thoughts about the advantages of bilingualism. Bialystok (2011) makes a case for bilingual individuals having a more robust executive control system. She explains that, because bilinguals must choose between two languages that are always active to some extent, the executive control system is pressed into service in the bilingual mind in a way that it is not for monolinguals. Bialystock also shows that bilinguals who suffer from Alzheimer's tend to begin showing signs of the disease several years later than monolinguals. While these benefits may seem remote or intangible, as Byers-Heinlein & Lew-Williams (2013) succinctly point out, there is an indisputable advantage of bilingualism that can be easily overlooked: bilingual children know and are able to use more than one language, and they can enjoy all of the concomitant benefits, including developing friendships with speakers of all of the languages the child knows, enjoying family relationships in two or more cultures, and having access to more career opportunities, among others.

Language is a complex, arbitrary, personal and social phenomenon that is different for each user and therefore difficult to investigate. Hoffman illustrates the complexity of individual differences listing 15 characteristics of people who might be considered bilingual. (Hoffman, 1991: 16, 17). Making any generalizations about language use or proficiency is already difficult among monolinguals, these problems are only multiplied when attempting to investigate bilinguals. It seems that there can be no absolute definition of bilingualism and any means of description must be flexible, context specific and fluid. Due to the complex nature of bilingualism, the study of it should be equally diverse, encompassing aspects of many disciplines outside of Linguistics particularly Sociology, Psychology, and Anthropology. Bilingualism must be determined, defined, and eventually measured by and within the context in which it exists. Every instance will likely be different; therefore measurement will have to consider many extraneous factors. Measurement of bilingualism has typically failed

to address all of the variables involved and has therefore lacked the validity necessary for any kind of generalization. The following study considers diversity of individual differences and contexts and uses a longitudinal approach to understand the process, challenges and advantages of bilingual first language acquisition.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to look at the experiences of bilingual children who have grown up learning and using English and Japanese, with the aim of identifying some attitudes and activities that may support other families seeking to raise bilingual children.

Examples and experiences from two comprehensive and detailed longitudinal case studies of will highlight the journey of different experiences language learning. With the benefit of hindsight, it is possible to identify variables, worries, strategies and challenges that could have been eliminated or improved.

Ultimately the results should provide useful insights for parents and educators while at the same time reducing needless anxiety and worry about language development. In the words of one of the respondents, it is possible to "just have fun learning [two languages with] no pressure."

Methods

A short, voluntary and anonymous survey (see the appendix) was distributed to nine people who have grown up learning and using English and Japanese. These respondents ranged in age from 11 to 18 years old. The survey questions asked about various aspects of learning and using Japanese and English and was designed to capture attitudes, experiences, advice and practices related to learning, using and living with both languages.

Longitudinal Case Studies

Case Studies 1 & 2

The following documents the process, development, and challenges over time of early bilingualism in Japanese and English of two children born and raised in

Japan. Subjects were male and female born two years apart. Both attended regular Japanese public schools from the age of 4 until high school. Neither had any formal English lessons and most exposure to the second language came from parents, media and regular visits to Canada. Visits to Canada were annual for 3-4 weeks and both children attended elementary school in Canada for a 6 month and a 3 month period. This represents the bulk of their exposure to English before the ages of 4 and 8 respectively.

Although in principle, both subjects had equal opportunities and exposure to both languages many experiences varied, personality, character and attitude towards learning language also contributed to variations in bilingual outcomes.

Individual differences can be described as follows:

Female (16)	**Male (18)**
Lived in Canada twice for a total of 9 months age 4-6 (Preschool, Kindergarten) Visited Canada every year since birth Chose Japanese standard HS Passive attitude towards English, enjoyed reading, watching videos. Output was sparse but precise. Focusing on quality of utterance vs quantity.	Lived in Canada twice for a total of 9 months age 6-8 (Grades 1 & 2) Visited Canada every year since birth Chose IB program with English Instruction Active attitude towards English, enjoyed music, videos and TV, playing with language, communicative attitude not focused on accuracy.

Both Children had limited exposure to English in Japan. Most linguistic input came from the father and various types of media (videos, books, games, workbooks, music). Tried to keep an English only environment in the home and Japanese outside. This was difficult to sustain over time, and Japanese naturally dominated most aspects of communication. Fortunately, a bilingual social network existed, and much interaction and motivation for communicating could be established through this group, creating lasting friendships and connections though activities and cultural events. This group combined with visits to Canada, represent the bulk of bilingual support and linguistic development. In Canada, children could communicate with friends and relatives and joined summer camps every year. This led to a basic level of English proficiency, but more

importantly a relevance and real connection to the language and culture and an increased motivation to learn, engage and communicate.

The main challenges to supporting and maintaining bilingual first language acquisition were primarily resources, exposure to language, including attitude, discipline and routines, and also the motivation and expectations of parents. Experience abroad is by far the most influential variable; however, it is not accessible to everyone nor sustainable realistically over the long term in that it requires much time and incurs a large financial burden. Children's motivation is also key. Children want to please their parents but are also influenced by monolingual peers, are easily distracted, and become lazy resorting to the dominant language whenever possible. It is important to maintain positive reinforcement and not place too much pressure on either language. It is also easy for parents to lose sight of bilingual goals, deferring to social norms, status quo, external pressures, or personal politics resorting to the dominant language without deeper consideration for the children or for the minority language partner. This can put tremendous stress on relationships between all members of the family.

It is important to create clear routines, rituals, and traditions for using the languages that comes naturally and does not have to be forced. Language learning in any case needs a context and should be self-motivated and autonomous, bilingual first language acquisition is no different. A final challenge in raising children bilingually is creating unrealistic expectations. Due to social pressures, cultural differences and relationship insecurities parents can place negative influence on children. Increases in language, proficiency cannot be observed, or measured overtly, but is largely hidden, and only becomes apparent. The unobservable nature of bilingual language acquisition, combined with the fact that there are many contributing variables can lead to frustration. It is important to rely on common sense and trust that language exposure and positive attitudes are enough to produce results.

Despite personality differences and inconsistent exposure and experience, at present both children have a strong command over both languages and can be considered officially bilingual. The female subject now 16 has a precise comprehensive knowledge of English but is a reticent communicator. She is good at

reading and writing and achieved a perfect score on the Eiken Level 2 exam. She is currently in a regular Japanese Private High School and is at the top of here class both in English and other subjects. In the future she wants to continue to travel and also live abroad.

The male subject now 18 has a strong motivation to communicate, enjoys experimenting with language and has a good sense of humor. He has completed a Highschool IB program in English and has an IELTS score of 7. His attitude towards studying language, accuracy and details prevent him from getting higher scores; however his communicative competence and engagement is indistinguishable from native speakers. In the future he wants to attend an English or International Business Program at a Japanese university, work overseas or in Japan as a business consultant for international and intercultural relations.

Bilingual first language acquisition as a lifestyle choice for the two children was a costly, time consuming and at times stressful experience; however, looking back the benefits, results and outcomes far exceed the efforts, sacrifices and expectations. Although results reported here are anecdotal and subjective, both children by external measures, have exceeded the average of their peers academically, demonstrating the higher cognitive skills associated with bilingualism. They are outgoing communicators in both languages and demonstrate an expanded worldview, high levels of flexibility and empathy as well as a natural meta-linguistic and meta-cultural awareness. By all measures, the bilingual first language acquisition experiment, seen in a longitudinal perspective, has been successful, in that it has led to high levels of communicative competence in both languages while also producing well rounded global citizens.

Case Studies 3 & 4

I first heard my older daughter, Daughter 1, laugh when I spoke to her in Japanese. It was a delightful belly laugh. For some reason, my saying a few words in my second language was hilarious to her. This is when questions about our daughter's language-learning journey came into sharper focus. Looking back, I can see that we did not have a set strategy for our daughter's language or that of our younger daughter, who came along about five years later. My wife and I knew only that we wanted both of our children to be bilingual. Reflecting on it

now, our rough strategy would best be described as maximizing exposure to the minority language, which was English.

Daughter 1 was born in the United States, but we moved to Japan when she was five months old. Before she started speaking, my wife and I felt sure she would be bilingual. My father's observation summed up our hope: "Before long, she will speak English better than you (addressing my wife, a native Japanese speaker), and she will speak Japanese better than you (addressing me, a native English speaker). We didn't have a plan for accomplishing this, nor did we feel we needed one.

Daughter 1 started preschool at the age of three. We planned to enroll her in a school with an English program or English-speaking teachers. We visited several schools, but none of them felt quite right. We eventually chose a school in the 森の幼稚園 (*mori no youchien*) group of schools. This organization, which translates to "forest preschool" prioritized outdoor play. Looking back, we feel we chose well. Her days were filled with climbing trees, catching insects, and playing in the mud. English, however, was not part of the program; it was up to us to figure that out.

At the time of the 2011 earthquake, just before her entrance into preschool, we were in the United States. We delayed our return to Japan, and our daughter missed the first several weeks of school. During this extended period in the United States, she spoke only English. My parents noticed that her language skills improved markedly during this time. When we finally returned to Japan, she needed to begin using Japanese at her preschool. It seemed to be a difficult transition for her—so much so that her teachers wondered if she understood Japanese. I worried needlessly that she wouldn't be able to catch up.

Soon Daughter 1 became able to participate fully in Japanese at school. My concern moved from Japanese to English. One day after school, she wanted to play a game she'd learned at school with us. To initiate this, she asked us to close our eyes. She said, "*me tsubute!*" (close your eyes) to my wife, and when it was my turn, she said the same to me. I encouraged her to say it in English. She paused for a moment and said, "Go to sleep!" Looking back, I see this as a wonderful indication of a quick mind in action— an instantaneous translation

from Japanese to a completely comprehensible phrase in English. At the time, however, I was concerned that she didn't know how to say "close your eyes" in English.

When our daughter wasn't in school, we tried to make English central in her life at home. I spoke English exclusively, and my wife used both English and Japanese. I read to her in English, and we gave her English videos to watch. I recall some intensity around the search for TV shows that would hold her attention and provide high-quality examples of English. The Canadian TV program *Little Bear* became a favorite, and we watched each episode multiple times. Though we can't be sure, we feel the program influenced the way she spoke. Her use of wholesome phrases like "oh dear" and "my goodness" seemed to mirror the speaking style of some of the characters on the show.

With Japanese as the primary language of daily life, regular visits to the United States and Skype calls with her American grandparents kept the need for English central for Daughter 1. We made the visits in the U.S. as long as possible. Her grandparents often commented on the linguistic development they observed during our daughter's time at their house.

When it was time for Daughter 1 to begin reading, we turned to my mother, who'd worked as a reading teacher. She suggested the *Bob Books* series. These books provide the simplest possible sentences and stories. Our daughter probably would not have chosen to read these, but she worked her way through the series. Her reading skills progressed nicely, and she was able to begin reading more advanced books.

She moved from the preschool to the local public elementary school, which was a five-minute walk from our house. Her entire school experience would be in Japanese save the occasional basic English class. As with preschool, English would be up to us.

When our daughter was in first grade, she became friends with a girl who spoke English fluently. She'd been living abroad with her Canadian mother and Japanese father. They had a weekly playdate and attended ballet lessons together. They spoke almost exclusively in English, mixing in the Japanese words from their school lives for which there was no easy English translation.

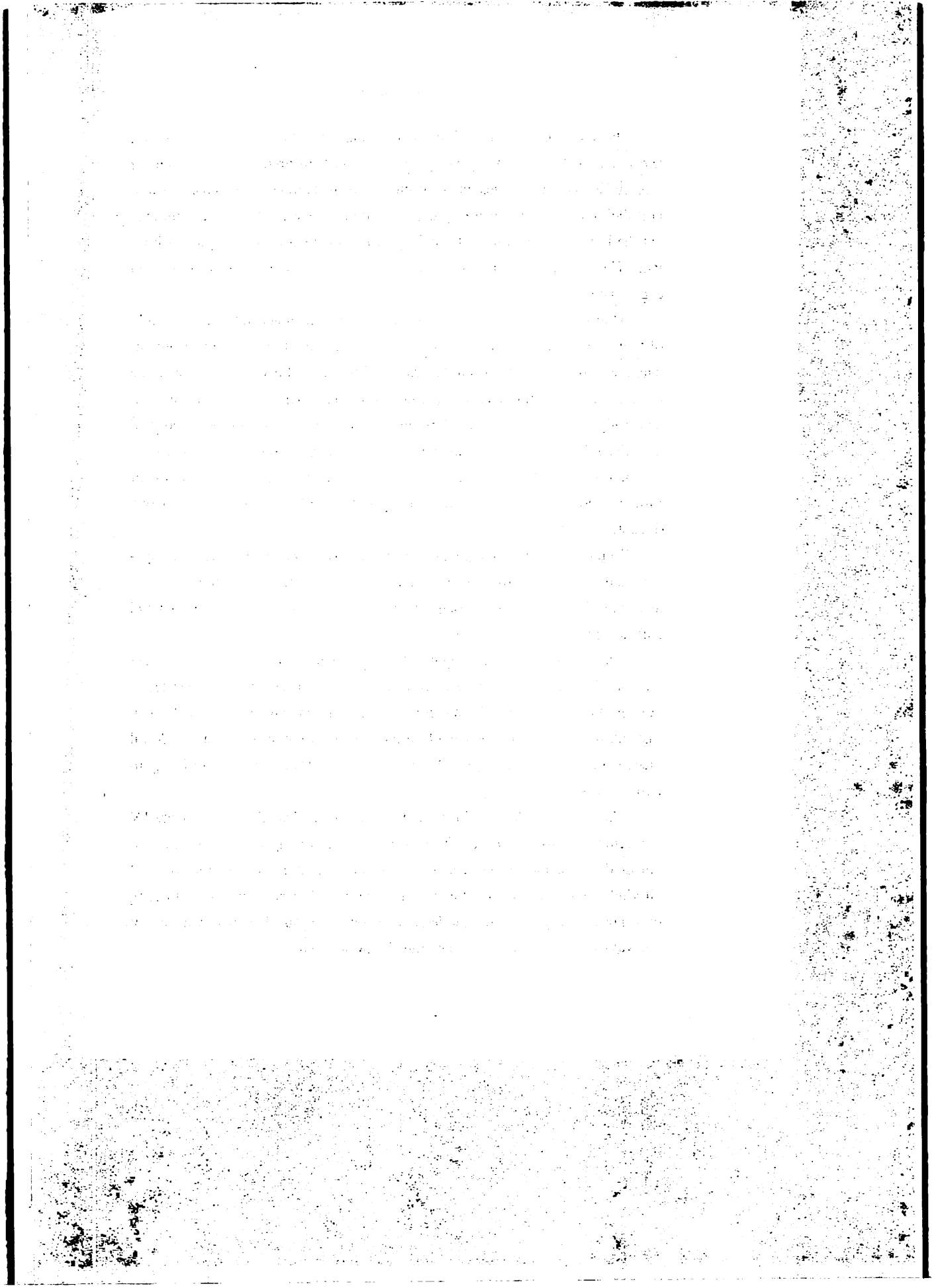
The yearly trips to the United States continued as did TV shows, movies, and books in English. When Daughter 1 was in fifth grade, she began taking weekly English classes designed for international families who wanted to support their children's English language education. It was a rather long commute, but the lessons added a more formal classroom element to our daughter's English. There were spelling lists and book reports. Overall, it was a good experience.

After completing six years at her Japanese elementary school, our family of four had the opportunity to spend a year in the United States. It had been our daughter's dream to attend an American school, and she would now have the chance. The pandemic had arrived, however, and though she was in the U.S. and ready to attend classes, all of her lessons were online. She made friends and participated fully in her lessons, but the experience fell short. For this reason, our family decided to have our two daughters remain in the United States for further schooling. I would return to Japan for work, and my wife and two daughters would continue.

Daughter 1 is now a sophomore in high school. She loves to read in Japanese and says that she finds it easier than reading in English. She studies French as her third language and participates in Model UN as well as the Speech and Debate Club at her high school.

Our second daughter, Daughter 2, is four years and nine months younger than our first. As is typical with a second child, we worried less about her development. For instance, we did not consider English-language preschools for her. Instead, we chose a nearby school on the edge of a forest. It was a wonderful place with a lot of outdoor play. Twice a week, she stayed after school for gymnastics classes.

Whereas our older daughter watched *Little Bear*, Daughter 2's favorite TV program was *Curious George*. We feel that these engaging stories aided her linguistic development. We noticed that she had a great ability to recount stories of all kinds—episodes at school and things she'd read or seen on TV. Reflecting on it now, I'd say that eliciting detailed accounts for our daughters was one of the ways we tried to support their English development.



Our family was looking forward to Daughter 2's first year of elementary school as it would be the first and likely only time our two daughters would attend the same school. Daughter 1 would be in sixth grade, and Daughter 2 would be in first.

When our Daughter 1 began her second year of Saturday English classes, we had Daughter 2 begin her first. The commute was long, and our daughters weren't thrilled to go to a class on the weekend. The classes were well run, though, by a caring group of parents who wanted their children to be bilingual

Before the beginning of the school year in the United States, our daughters, having moved from Japan, were asked to undergo some language testing to see if they would need ESL classes at their schools. It was determined that Daughter 1 would not require these classes, but Daughter 2 would. This was no surprise. She'd completed one year of public school in Japan and had been learning to read and write in Japanese. She'd been reading the *Bob Books* but wasn't able to read at a second-grade level.

Learning that Daughter 2 would need ESL support, we turned again to my mother, a former reading teacher with years of experience and boxes of materials ready to go. Grandmother and granddaughter committed to a series of summer reading lessons to prepare for the upcoming school year. Grandfather helped, too, by reading to and being read to by his granddaughter. Daughter 2's progress was rapid, and by the time school started, she was a competent reader.

The head ESL teacher met with Daughter 2 and determined that she wouldn't need the special ESL classes that were available. Flash forward to fourth grade: Daughter 2 has been invited to the advanced reading class. In the United States, her English flourished, but her Japanese didn't get much use. She spoke occasionally with her mom and older sister, but English was the language of daily life for everyone, and the trio tended to gravitate to English even if a conversation began in Japanese.

Daughter 2 is now in Japan, a fifth grader at an international school, where English is the language of instruction. She has a Japanese class twice a week. While her Japanese speaking ability held steady and may have progressed somewhat while she was away from Japan, her reading and writing languished.

We hope she enjoys studying Japanese as she brings her two languages into balance.

Bilingualism Survey Results

In this section, we share common themes, organized under the relevant survey question, that emerged in survey responses. In addition to these broader themes, we include standalone comments that provide insight into the bilingual experience.

What do you find most challenging about learning and using two languages?

According to our respondents, bilingual children who speak English and Japanese tend to encounter some challenges related to language interference, vocabulary gaps, cultural differences, and the need for a mindset shift when switching between languages. These challenges serve to underscore the complexity of bilingualism, but they also highlight the adaptability of individuals who become proficient in using two languages effectively. The overall tone of respondents suggests that they take these challenges in stride as part of being bilingual. One respondent stated that she felt "no struggles" because "[managing two languages] has just been my life."

What do you find most positive about learning and using two languages?

The positive aspects of learning and using two languages, as perceived by bilingual children, include enhanced communication and global opportunities, cognitive and linguistic benefits, and the expansion of cultural awareness. Some respondents mentioned an ability to and interest in looking at language more critically, which suggests metalinguistic awareness, the capacity to "reflect on and manipulate the structural features of languages" (Nagy & Anderson, 1998, p. 155). These points seem to indicate that respondents are aware of some of the multifaceted benefits of being bilingual, ranging from practical advantages to intellectual growth and cultural enrichment.

Can you share a positive experience where being bilingual has been helpful to you?

The positive experiences shared by our respondents highlight the notion that being bilingual is helpful in facilitating communication and building relationships, such as teaching friends new words or assisting in translation during a football trip. It also provides academic and possible future career advantages. One respondent, for instance, mentioned that her bilingualism helped her to secure a scholarship. Finally, some respondents reported that their ability to speak both English and Japanese allowed them to establish friendships more easily when, for example, visiting another country for study or travel.

[What] was most helpful for learning Japanese? Why?

While respondents have had unique experiences, according to their comments, the most helpful factors for learning Japanese often involve real-life interactions, immersion, and exposure to the language. Real conversations with friends, growing up in a Japanese-speaking environment, and attending school in Japan were all valuable experiences contributing to language acquisition.

[What] was most helpful for learning English? Why?

The factors that were most helpful for learning English often involve exposure to native speakers, regular conversations, engagement with English-language media, and, in most cases, visits to English-speaking countries.

What advice would you give to other kids or parents about learning two languages?

Overall, the advice from survey respondents, all bilingual, underscores the importance of consistency, early exposure, and a positive, supportive learning environment. Embracing the language learning journey and not fearing mistakes are essential aspects of successful bilingualism. It is interesting to note the interplay of external factors, such as family support and internal factors, including a positive attitude about making mistakes.

Discussion: Insights from Bilingual Children's Experiences and Their Relevance for Parents and Educators

The greatest challenge for families seeking to raise bilingual children, put simply, is this: providing adequate support for the minority language (Pearson, 2007). For the respondents in our survey, English was the minority language when they were young children growing up in Japan. They learned Japanese as a matter of course. English, however, needed special attention.

With the aim of understanding how to provide proactive support for the minority language, this final section looks at the insights derived from the experiences of bilingual children themselves as they describe their journey of learning and using two languages, Japanese and English. These insights, while drawn from the perspectives of children, offer valuable guidance for both parents seeking to raise bilingual children and teachers engaged in bilingual education.

1. The Impact of Early Exposure and Consistency: Bilingual children's accounts emphasize the significance of early exposure to both languages and the importance of maintaining consistency in language use. These firsthand experiences remind us that children can adapt and excel in a bilingual environment when exposed to both languages from an early age. Parents and educators can draw from these accounts to create supportive bilingual environments and to remain consistent.

2. Fostering Confidence and a Positive Learning Atmosphere: Bilingual children highlight the importance of fostering confidence in language learning and maintaining a positive learning atmosphere. Their narratives emphasize that making mistakes is a natural part of the language-learning process and that a supportive environment is crucial for developing linguistic skills. Parents and educators alike can encourage children to speak freely in both languages without fear of errors.

3. Cultural Enrichment and Bilingualism: The firsthand experiences of bilin-

gual children reveal that bilingualism not only enhances language skills but also deepens cultural understanding. These accounts emphasize the cultural enrichment that accompanies language acquisition. Parents and educators can use these insights to acknowledge the cultural value of bilingualism and integrate cultural aspects into language education.

4. The Role of Educational Institutions: Bilingual children often mention the pivotal role of formal education in their language development. Their experiences suggest that attending schools or programs that promote bilingualism can significantly contribute to proficiency in both languages. Parents and educators may wish to consider the impact of educational institutions and explore opportunities to support formal bilingual education.

5. Multilingualism and Future Opportunities: Bilingual children's accounts reaffirm the numerous benefits of multilingualism, from expanded educational and future career opportunities to greater cultural awareness. These insights can help parents and educators appreciate the positive outcomes of multilingualism and encourage children to embrace the challenge of learning multiple languages.

6. Preparing for a Globalized World: As highlighted by the respondents, the ability to speak multiple languages is increasingly relevant in our globalized society. These firsthand experiences underscore the importance of preparing children for a world where effective intercultural communication is essential. Parents and educators can use these insights to adapt bilingual education to the demands of an interconnected world.

7. Human Connection: Spread through the survey responses were multiple references to the expanded opportunities for human connection open to bilinguals, exemplified by two words: "help" and "friends." Respondents mentioned that they, because of their language abilities, were able to offer help in a variety of ways including translating for monolingual peers while traveling, helping an

exchange student get acclimated at a new school, and teaching Japanese words to English-speaking classmates. Many respondents mentioned the value of talking with friends for language learning as well as the value of knowing a language for making friends.

Conclusion

In asking bilingual children and young adults about growing up learning and using Japanese and English, the researchers hoped to gain a better understanding of their perceptions and experiences. While cognitive complexities occurred out of sight, the respondents were simply living their lives using Japanese when appropriate and moving to English when the context shifted. It might be Japanese at school, and English at home, or perhaps Japanese with neighborhood friends and English at weekend gatherings. Their advice to children and families on the path to bilingualism is solid: have fun, don't worry about mistakes, and stick with it. Their comments about the benefits of being bilingual paint a picture of a life rich in opportunities—personal, academic, cultural, and professional. As educators and parents, it may be worthwhile keeping these in mind when thinking about how best to support our children and students as they progress along the bilingual path.

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