



# *the strength of bilingualism*

***Miriam Giugni***

***Bilingual Children's Interest Group***

Languages create our world. They are the means by which we speak, think, interact, dream, communicate, write, sing, love, dance and exist. Language is the source of culture where history is kept and family values and beliefs are practiced. The world is created in and through language and culture. They are the foundation of identity.



## **The Joy of Language and Culture**

This is a Latin American multicultural playgroup where children and adults speak Spanish at all times. In this context language, culture and identity have rich vitality, as interactions include music and movement, story telling and games from Latin America. This photograph captures a freeze frame where playing percussion instruments and singing becomes a language rich experience, passing on cultural history and socialisation.

- **David, Nicholas, Oriana, Douglas and Jordan engage in a language rich experience reflecting their cultural identity.**

***language as a way of learning:***

Language learning is an ongoing process. It happens each minute of our lives. In an educational setting, language learning can become a formal practice where we learn the grammatical structures and functions of language that will assist us in making meaning of the world as we experience it. We use recognised conventions to express what we are thinking, feeling and experiencing. People experience these conventions in a variety of ways and approach language learning from an individual position which is built into the relationships around us to create what language means in that social setting. Then we use words, intonation, facial expression, signing and physical gestures and responses to express and explain our ideas, thoughts and experiences (Jones Diaz, 1997; Makin, Campbell & Jones Diaz, 1995).

**So what does this mean for a child learning two languages?**

How are the conventions of the language being constructed with other people to make meaningful expressions and understandings of the world?

**So long...farewell...auf wiedersehen...tchao!**

Jordan is 2.1 years of age. He identifies with Portuguese and English. During a visit to his Grandmother's work place the following interaction occurred:

When leaving the office, a colleague said: "Bye-bye."

Jordan responded to this farewell: "Bye! Tchao!"

He used the word 'bye' in English to respond, however, he immediately switched to use the word 'tchao' (also meaning 'bye') in Portuguese. Jordan confidently uses two linguistic codes in his social interactions.

(da Silva, 2001)

***keeping language  
alive:***  
*(language retention)*

Australia is a multilingual society. Many people living in Australia use their language expertise, which is often different from English. In Australia the language used for mainstream education is English there are some circumstances where bilingual education occurs in community majority languages. Community language schools have been set up in an attempt to highlight the importance of first/home language retention for many reasons:

- To maintain linguistic and cultural relationships and reinforce the expertise of home language and family practices:

Family values and practices are created in language. Cultural practices and celebrations are a part of this language. As a nation that rejoices in diversity, historical values and ceremonies that conceive every day life should be honoured in the language of their origins.

- To give best possible support for second language learning:

**Learning two or more languages**

If learning a second language is an important family issue, the best way to learn a second language is through the expertise of the first language. For some children their first language is the home language, for other children the first language is English because there is less access to the home language in the community. The first/home language should be consistently maintained as a priority for second language learning. If the first language is well developed and understood the second language will follow the same pattern. However, if the first/home language is fragmented the second will also follow that pattern making learning more confusing and resulting in the potential loss of the first/home language and culture. The first/home language is the foundation for all additional language learning.

***becoming  
bilingual:***

**Approaches to this maintenance include:**

- speaking the first/home language at home
- speaking in the home/first language in the community with other speakers of the same language
- representing your first/home language in the educational institution
- visiting the educational setting to read, tell stories, sing, etc in the first/home language

In English speaking educational settings there will be plenty of opportunity for second language learning. With good fluency in the first/home language, learning English as a second language may happen quite rapidly with good understanding.

'Bilingualism' is a term used to describe a person who has knowledge of more than one language. There are two usual ways of becoming bilingual, simultaneously (two languages at the same time) and successively (one language after the other). Australia is a community that embraces a wide variety of languages although the dominant language is English. The opportunities for children to engage in the English speaking communities are plenty, therefore, the emphasis on prioritising first/home language maintenance should bring the linguistic background to the foreground of the child's learning.

When a child identifies with being a simultaneous bilingual it is important to remember that there is not a distinct line between where one language interaction ends and another begins. There is a great need for sensitivity for both interactions to honour the other and to allow the smooth transition from one language to the other(s). This mixing of language is referred to as code switching, speakers usually have a purposeful use for mixing languages to enhance communication and meaning in relation to their context.

## **CODES AND CODES**

Dominic (2. 5) and his father are in the kitchen. His father hands him a cup of water.

D: Yo quiero poco de aqua  
[I want a little bit of water]

F: Dile a Mummy que Papi me dio un poco de aqua  
[Tell Mummy that Papi gave me a little bit of water]

D: (he walks to his mother, in the living room)  
Papi gave me un poco de aqua  
[Papi gave me a little bit of water]

(Jones Diaz, 1993)

The word 'code' represents relational language processes in the brain where a set of linguistic and cultural practices are connected in order to function as a thought and concept builder creating the child's interpretation and understanding of the world around them. When this is happening in two 'codes' there are two sets of understandings (Arnberg, 1987; Saunders, 1988).

When bilingual children learn two codes it takes time for them to interpret and understand different meanings, because they look and sound different. Words are also created within cultural practices giving them special meanings.

This means the word 'child' is a term that holds special meaning that is culturally built into the shape and sound of the written and spoken word. The concept of a child is transferable from language to language but the form varies as illustrated below.

<b>English</b>	<b>Italian</b>	<b>Gundungurra</b>	<b>Tagalog</b>
Child	Bambino/a	Coota	Anák

Often bilingual children are compared with monolingual children in relation to their language learning and assumed to be 'delayed'.

This is not the case. The process of learning two languages, two complete sets of codes and concepts, is a long term process and should not be measured against a child learning only one language.

When working with children who identify as being bilingual this concept of code switching should be considered and nurtured to optimise support for first/home language and additional languages in relation to each other.

***additive and  
subtractive  
bilingualism:***

These terms are used to describe the addition of a language and the subtraction of a language. Additive bilingualism is where a person has a language(s) and learns or 'adds' on another language. The environment in which people are learning the 'add on' language has a great impact on the level of proficiency and understanding they will develop as the structure of the society reflects the attitude to multilingualism. A positive societal structure means a positive and supportive approach to additive bilingualism. Subtractive bilingualism is where a person has two or more languages and loses one of the languages – usually the first/home language is lost in the process of learning the second or new language (Makin et al 1995). This is the reason why we need to address the use of first/home languages at home and in educational settings to ensure that the subtraction of first/home language (and culture) is not as likely to occur. The emphasis is on maintaining the first/home language within the family interactions as consistently as possible to avoid complete loss of relational language.

Additive bilingualism can occur at any age. Researchers describe this as a similar process to learning the first/home language, however, the knowledge and understandings created in the first language can become the foundation for second language learning (Arnberg, 1987; Tabors, 1997; Skutnabb-kangas, 1981). There is an idea that unless in a simultaneous situation, learning a second language should only occur when a person is fluent in the first/home language (Gibbons, 1991). This is not the case for many people in Australia.

## **BEING BILINGUAL IS BRILLIANT!**

It's great to be bilingual! Having the luxury of two (or more) languages enables a wider capacity for flexibility in thinking, acquiring information, understanding of concepts and social interactions, empathy for many points of view, communicating in more than one language, having the opportunity to interact with different cultures, passing on your family values and customs and history, passing on language and knowledge. The list is endless! Bilingualism is a valued part of family relationships and should be a pleasure that is celebrated on a daily basis.

### ***bilingualism as social power or 'social capital':***

When a society has one dominant language other languages may be slowly lost through the pressure of having to learn the main language of the society. This does not have to be the case. Being bilingual can be seen as a powerful identity, and the main language of the society can be a common or bridging language, but not necessarily the language that builds or constructs a child's or families' life and cultural identity. Access for children (and families) to the main language is important, however, maintaining access to the first/home language is equally if not more important for long term participation in local communities. Language loss can sometimes result in loss of cultural and family ties, which may cause a breakdown in communication within the family and less opportunity to pass on traditional ideas and customs.

It is easy to conceive that the main language will have more power or 'capital'. However, a way to counteract this idea is to support first/home languages both in the society and in educational



settings. This allows the value of the 'community languages' to be better recognised and therefore bilingualism has greater access to 'social capital'.

In the eyes of an adult therefore having access to two languages should be recognised as a form of 'social capital'. Promoting this attitude in childhood (care and educational settings) may assist in funding community languages with a social currency that will eventually be recognised and celebrated as a powerful form of social capital (Bourdieu, 1991).

***dialect:***

Dialect is a term used to describe variations of language. In some instances it can mean that the same (or similar) language is spoken in different geographical locations (countries and regions) and /or that language is ever changing and develops uniqueness between cultural groups. For example there are many Aboriginal languages across Australia and some 'dialects' are specific to locations and cultural groups. Other examples are the use of Aboriginal English, and Australian English that are dialects of a larger English language code. Language is dynamic and flexible, it can shift and change easily according to where you live, the languages you speak, the cultural groups you interact with to name a few. With this in mind it is easy to see how the same language can vary from cultural group to group.

Hierarchies in dialectal distinctions can endure the same power issues that occur in the relationship between community language(s) and a dominant language. This can reflect the social structure of the society and relate to class (and race).

***home language***

***loss:***

***(language attrition)***

An American researcher, Wong Fillmore (1991) conducted a nation wide study of bilingual children entitled: "When learning a second language means losing the first". Through this study she revealed

that children from LOTE backgrounds who were exposed to English at a preschool age had a strong desire to learn and function in English and through this rejected their first/home language. This rejection resulted in a breakdown of cultural communication in many cases causing devastating effects for family relationships. Children are very clever and are able to see the attitude towards the 'capital' that a dominant language can give them access to. We have a responsibility to promote an attitude that first/home languages are as powerful as English to focus on the long term positives of bilingualism.

---

***bilingual lingo:***

- **relational language:** language in relation to people, places and practices.
- **social capital:** a societal measure of the power generated by social and cultural interactions
- **cultural identity:** identifying with places, people and practices.
- **community language:** a language spoken outside the dominant language.

---

***about the group:***

BCIG is a non-funded community based network. Members are people from across the community who have an interest in bilingualism and language learning including educators from early childhood settings, support teams and academics. The group aims to provide support and information for families while raising awareness of bilingualism and biculturalism throughout the community, to promote the benefits of bilingualism through supporting advocacy and research into policy procedures at state and national levels.

**contacts:**

**Miriam da Silva & Ketty Montero**

Tel: (02) 9335 2180  
email: resup@marrickville.nsw.gov.au

**Tessy Panta**

Tel: (02) 9724 2539  
email: tpanta@fairfieldcity.nsw.gov.au

**Sarina Leotta**

Tel: (02) 9724 7875  
email: sleotta@fairfieldcity.nsw.gov.au

**about the author:**

**Miriam Giugni** is an Honours student at the University of Western Sydney where she is studying Early Childhood Education and Italian. She is passionate about bilingualism and second language learning and believes it to be a matter of social justice.

**bibliography:**

Arnberg, L. (1987). *Raising children bilingually: the preschool years*. Great Britain: Multilingual Matters.

Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power*. Great Britain: Polity Press.

Da Silva, M. (2001), Language sample anecdote. Unpublished.

Eades, D. (1995). Aboriginal English. In *Aboriginal literacy resource kit*. Sydney: Board of Studies New South Wales

Gibbons, P. (1991). *Learning to learn in a second language*. Newtown, NSW: Primary English Teaching Association.

Gregory, E. (1997). *One child many worlds: early learning in multilingual communities*. London: David Fulton.

Jones Diaz, C (1993) How does social context and language dominance impact on early language learning in bilingual children? Unpublished MA thesis, University of Technology Sydney.

Jones Diaz, C. (1997) *Bilingualism, biliteracy and beyond: Building Blocks for Biliteracy*. Keynote paper presented at the third annual conference of the Bilingual Children's Interest Group: Sydney.

Kohen, J. (1993). The Darug and their neighbours :The traditional Aboriginal owners of the Sydney region. Darug Tribal Aboriginal Corporation incorporating Darug Link:Blacktown

Makin, L., Campbell, J., Jones Diaz, C. (1995). *One Childhood: Many Languages. Guidelines for Early Childhood Education in Australia*. Pymble: Harper Educational.

Saunders, G. (1988). *Bilingual children: from birth to teens*. Great Britain: Multilingual matters.

Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (1981). *Bilingualism or not: the education of minorities*. Britain: Multilingual matters.

Tabors, P. (1997). *One child, two languages*. Paul.H. Brookes: Baltimore.

Wong Fillmore, L (1991) When learning a second language means losing the first. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly: 6*, 323-346.