

Bilingual Comprehension

Deborah Chitester presents her personal views on common confusions in bilingualism

Bilingualism is quite a misunderstood phenomenon. In fact, there still remain those who believe that it can cause retardation or other learning problems. Others believe it hinders the learning process and causes “language confusion.” In my own professional practice where I have worked over time with hundreds of dual and second language children, many parents have asked me if they should delay their children learning more than one language as it is thought this will predispose the child to becoming language delayed. To add fuel to the fire, there is a heated political controversy surrounding bilingualism which I have found, is largely based on the perception that bilingual education has failed miserably.

What is not taken into account is the fact that many models of bilingual education in American schools are and have not been executed properly. That is to say that the particular model of bilingual education used may not be supported by the administration in the school, or there is a randomness with which languages are used for the purposes of instruction. Often, it is a consequence of insufficient funding. This, of course affects parental as well as administrative perceptions of bilingualism as well as tangible educational outcomes. In recent years, I have found this to be a major concern of parents who might have otherwise placed their children into what they perceive to be a well-run bilingual program without much hesitation. Well-run bilingual programs are very difficult to locate — remember, a dual-language program that encompasses and encourages development of both languages is optimal. Good bilingual programs are run with an underlying methodology that is consistent with the proliferation of a healthy model of bilingualism by taking into account that kind of language stimulation and immersion which is consistent with the development of bilingualism. There must be sufficient exposure to both languages with rich models for bilingualism to be optimally facilitated.

There has been an increased interest in dual-language programs from families whose first language is not English, and who desire an environment for their children where bilingualism can become a reality. Additionally, there has been an increase in the demand for bilingual playgroups where children are surrounded and immersed in a language-enriched, play-based environment. As play is a child’s primary

learning medium and tool, it fosters and facilitates the development of any language system. As a means of promoting childhood bilingualism, bilingual playgroups have been successful with children as young as twelve months of age. Parents have asked me if TV shows like *Dora the Explorer* and *Diego* are sufficient to foster bilingual skills through their aural exposure to the Spanish language. Such shows are not enough since learning language requires repetition and allowances for mistakes and proper and accurate modeling of immediate correct models for imitative purposes. Learning a language requires an environment that provides the opportunity for the back and forth that is needed to learn a language. This model should optimally be given by a speaker or speakers who possess a strong intact ability to speak the language almost flawlessly. These television programs can be helpful but do not in any way substitute for the language enrichment feature that the bilingual playgroup experience truly affords. In bilingual playgroups, I have observed the strong impact of learning a second language in a play-activity environment where repetition and the ability to practice language with a strong model is bountiful as well as consistent.

That which is good for first-language learning is also important and necessary for successful second-language acquisition. It is critical for the bilingual playgroup to be based on appropriately constructed methodologies that are consistent with those factors positively correlated with successful second language acquisition — the internal motivation of the child is important, while the opportunity and access to the appropriate language models are also necessary. Activities that properly and appropriately expose children to the second language in a comprehensible way are absolutely critical and a fundamental part of any well constructed and planned bilingual playgroup. With playgroups using these principles, I have found there to be a high rate of successful second language learning with children age 18 months to five years.

Their misunderstanding of what the word bilingual means contributes to the confusion as well. Often, children who are learning two languages are labeled bilingual or a child of Hispanic origin is often inappropriately referred to as bilingual. Actually, the word “bilingual” is misused quite frequently by many on many occasions. In my experience, teachers and parents misuse the word when speaking about