Community Languages in Family Day Care

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Abstract

Parents who are native speakers of a community language and wish to raise their children bilingually are often frustrated by their children's limited attainment in the community language. These difficulties are particularly pronounced for working parents. Family Day Care providers who are native speakers of a language other than English can be an important resource to parents who wish to raise their children bilingually. The aim of this paper is to make parents and care givers aware of some key factors in raising children with a community language alongside English. They are adults' consistency in language choice, the creation of a need for the child to speak the community language, and language input which facilitates the acquisition of vocabulary and grammatical structures. Parents and carers are given ideas on how to ensure that these conditions are met.

INTRODUCTION

Parents who are native speakers of a community language and wish to raise their children bilingually are often frustrated by their children's limited attainment in the community language (Harding and Riley, 1986; Arnberg, 1987; Döpke, 1992). To a degree these difficulties are due to restricted exposure to the community language both in terms of amount of time and in terms of number of people from whom the child hears the community language. Limitations in the exposure to the community language are particularly pronounced in families where both parents work. Family day care providers who are speakers of the child's home language can be an important resource for the child's bilingual development. Unfortunately, parents as well as care providers are often unsure about how to proceed. The aim of this paper is to make parents and care givers aware of three key factors in raising children with a community language alongside

English: (a) consistency in language choice, (b) child-centred language use which facilitates the acquisition of vocabulary and grammatical structures, and (c) creating a need to speak the community language.

CONSISTENCY IN LANGUAGE CHOICE

Consistency in language choice is extremely important for the child's bilingual development (Döpke, 1992). It gives even the youngest child a clear guide to the differences between languages as s/he is able to associate particular people with one language or the other (Taeschner, 1983; Saunders, 1988). Another aspect of consistency of language choice is the constancy and continuity of input. While there are some reports that children have become competent users of a community language although their care givers frequently switched between languages (Goodz, 1994), in most cases the community language eventually gives way to the language of the society at large, ie. to English in Australia, unless the adults made a firm decision to consistently use the community language when interacting with the child (Harding and Riley, 1986; Arnberg, 1987; Saunders, 1988). Consistency of language use also ensures that the complexity of the language addressed to the child continues to accommodate the child's growing intellect and remains age appropriate.

Many adults find being consistent in their language choice very difficult. They frequently fall back onto English. This way the child is placed in a situation like the following:

> *Mummy speaks English or Greek to me and everybody else speaks English*
> *to me. Consequently I can choose to speak English or Greek to Mummy, but*
> *because I hear English much more than Greek, English words come more*
> *easily. So why should I use Greek?*

However, if the adult can get used to only speaking the community language him/herself when interacting with the child, then the following scenario is the one that presents itself to the child:

Daddy speaks English to most people, but with me he only speaks Italian. I love Daddy and I like him to spend special time with me. I want to do everything Daddy does, and I also want to speak like him.

The care giver in the family day care situation should be introduced to the child as speaking "like Mummy" and/or "like Daddy", and can be added to the list of people named when the language distribution is explicitly discussed with the child.

In order for adults to feel confident about using the community language with the child it is best to make a decision to *never* speak anything but this particular language with the child and to start this as soon as the child is born or from the first time they have contact with a child if s/he is not their own. At the beginning the adults might have to remind themselves frequently, but once the habit is formed language choice becomes automatically tied to the person being addressed. Slips in language choice can be openly corrected as soon as they have occurred through self-translation and some remark of the type: "How silly of me. I just spoke English to you", which is of course to be said in the community language. If the adult does not know the appropriate word for something in the community language, this is best discussed with the child. The older child might even be able to help out. Alternatively, the adult and child can enter into an agreement over what to call the item in question until the correct term is found or remembered. Explicit remarks about the language choice strengthen the child's awareness of these issues and give him/her strategies for dealing with lexical gaps.

If care givers decide to always speak the community language to a child in their care, then they do not only increase the time at which the child has a chance to hear the language, but also the range of situations in which they are likely to speak it. Consequently, the language input will be enriched: The child will hear an increased variety of words, and common words will be used more frequently than when the care giver switched between the community language and English. Both will help the child to broaden the lexical base of the community language.

Consistency also plays an important role in the structural development of the languages. Initially the child will not know what "a language" is, but only understand that different people speak in different ways. If the interlocutors are consistent with their language choice the child will find it much easier to realise that everything mummy and a particular care giver say belongs to one language system and everything other people say to the other. The two different systems are later easily labelled "English" and "Japanese".

In the case of community language background as well as English background children being placed in the care of the same care giver, the best approach is to consistently address each child in the appropriate language when interacting individually with the children. When addressing community language background children and English background children on a topic relevant to both groups of children the care giver should ideally say everything twice, once in the community language and once in English. In the case of more complex issues the care giver might want to sit down with each group of children separately for a while. All children will benefit from this type of attention in more than just linguistic ways.

If the children are old enough to question communication practices the language choice decision should be explained to the English speaking children and care should be taken that they are always kept informed about what is being said in the other language. This practice will ultimately benefit both groups of children: for the community language background children it will keep the community language input up; the English background children will learn about people speaking different languages first hand and develop some LOTE knowledge in an informal way. The language skills which the English background children will develop through such informal exposure to a LOTE will benefit their metalinguistic awareness, which is an important part of cognitive development and literacy (Yelland, 1993).

CHILD–CENTRED LANGUAGE INPUT

It is important to be aware that the child will only know as much of the community language as s/he has heard from his/her parents and other care givers. The more the child hears the community language, the better his/her knowledge will become. If the child is able to decode what is being said to her, feels understood when she tries to talk to others and, therefore, finds it rewarding to talk to them and hear them talk to her, she *is* going to learn that language. The more interlocutors there are, the better the chance that some of them will provide the type of input necessary to learn the language, as everybody will provide a little bit of useful input which eventually amounts to what the child needs to decode and recode the language. However, in the absence of many interlocutors in the community language, language acquisition can be significantly helped if the language which is addressed to the child is sensitive to the child's language learning needs. These needs change over time with the increasing age of the child.

In very young children language learning is best helped when the adults play with the child, when they concentrate on what the child is doing and go along with it (Hubbel, 1977; Cross, 1978; Döpke, 1986, 1992). This will automatically help the adults understand what the child is saying as well as help the child decode what the adults are saying. Young children very much like repetitive actions which at the same time allow for repetitive language models. Frequent repetitions of lexical items and whole sentences which map the surrounding world onto language are successful language teaching tools (Moerk, 1983, 1992; Döpke 1988, 1992). Young children also enjoy when adults repeat the child's utterance (Stella-Prorok, 1983). This gives the children the feeling they are listened to and understood, and motivates them to contribute to the verbal interaction further. At the same time, modified adult repetitions of child utterances provide important language models to which the children are most likely to pay attention and which they are most likely able to decode since they are in direct response to what the child has said or has tried to say.

Cuddling up with the child in a soft corner or on a special seat and looking at books together is very rewarding for both adults and children and supports the child's language development. Initially it is much more important to talk about the pictures than to read the text. Once the child knows a book she will want to talk about the pictures herself, and the adult can gradually build on the child's contributions with longer and more complex utterances. Singing and laughing with the child, and talking about the immediate surroundings are also very conducive to language learning. The lack of varied interlocutors can to some degree be compensated for through audio and video cassettes. For many languages there are a range of music cassettes, radio plays and children's video programs available commercially.

Pre-school children enjoy role plays. If adults get involved, role plays are an important resource for language development as well as the child's learning about the world. Pre-school children also like to help with adult chores. Rich verbal interaction around cooking, cleaning and gardening etc. provides language input at increasingly complex language levels. Many commercially available games are language–centred and can be adapted for use with a community language.

As the child gets older reading books becomes increasingly important. Through books it is possible to talk about new and varied experiences which are not necessarily available in the child's everyday reality. It is possible to capitalise on the child's interest and stimulate the language development in that way. Most importantly, the reading of books introduces children to decontextualised language, which is the most central teaching and learning tool in the Australian school system, as well as in other Western school systems, and leads into adult type language use (Wells, 1985). Decontextualised language is instrumental in gaining and transmitting information without direct experience. It stimulates the imagination and becomes a powerful creative tool.

Other areas of decontextualised language which become important as the child grows older are the recounting of past events, reasoning, hypothetical language and debate. Asking the child to

tell a third person what had happened, requesting her to explain her actions, discussing other people's feelings or what the child would have done in a similar situation, and engaging in arguments extend the language beyond the immediate environment and prepare the child for the more advanced language uses of the adult world. The better the bilingual child masters these cognitively more demanding uses of language in both her languages, the greater is the cognitive benefit of being bilingual (Cummins, 1991a,b).

Frequent exchanges between care givers and parents about the experiences the child has had in various situations at home and with the family day care provider, about activities s/he enjoyed and things s/he said act as a bridge between the two environments, which strengthen both enironments in supporting the child's language development. Such knowledge enables the adults to ask questions which motivate the child to recount past experiences or to reinvoke an experience s/he is already familiar with, both of which reinforce the child's linguistic abilities.

THE CREATION OF A NEED FOR THE CHILD TO SPEAK THE COMMUNITY LANGUAGE

Children will learn as much of a language as they need to in order to communicate with the people around them. If they are consistently addressed in a particular language, they will learn to understand that language. If they have to speak the language in order to be understood and get their needs met, they will learn to speak that language. That is, of course, the case for English. Children usually learn to speak English in Australia because otherwise they will not understand what is happening around them and not be able to get people to do what they want them to do.

In the case of community languages, interactants are mostly bilingual in English and the community language. Consequently, the need to speak the community language does not come as naturally as the need to speak English. However, adult interactants can create a need for speaking the community language by not allowing English to become the easy way out for the child. If adults make it more difficult for the child to get her/his needs met when speaking

English than when speaking the community language, s/he will soon realise that it is worth the extra effort to retrieve a less often heard lexical item or grammatical structure in the community language.

As a first step towards creating a need for speaking the community language, adults should be explicit about the language contract. By about two years of age most children become obsessed with attributing objects to one parent or the other. This is the perfect time to stop accepting words from either language from the child and to introduce the concept of "mummy words" and "daddy words". The following example shows how this can be realised. It is an extract from a conversation between a two-year-old boy and his German–speaking mother.

(1)   Child: das a plane

                        'that a plane'

      Mother: ja das ist ein *Flugzeug* !

                        'yes that is a *plane* !'

                        aber Mami sagt nicht *plane*, Mami sagt *Flugzeug* !

                        'but Mummy doesn't say *plane*, Mummy says *Flugzeug* !'

                        Daddy sagt *plane* , und Mami sagt *Flugzeug* !

                        'Daddy says *plane*, and Mummy says *Flugzeug* !'

                        kannst du *Flugzeug* sagen ?

                        'can you say *plane* ?'

Little sequences like this are extremely useful for the child's successful acquisition of the community language. First of all, the adult is positive about the child's attempt at communicating, and by rephrasing and translating what the child has just said proves to the child that she has understood. This in itself is the reward the child would have wanted. Secondly, the desired vocabulary item is repeated several times. It is quite possible that the child chose *plane* because he had never heard *Flugzeug* before. The child might also have chosen *plane* rather than *Flugzeug* because *plane* is easier to pronounce than *Flugzeug*. Or the child might have chosen

the English word because he had heard it more often and from more people so that it came to mind more easily. All of this is counteracted to a degree by the repeated use of the appropriate term. Lastly, but very importantly, the "language contract" is being made explicit by this sequence. Stating the language contract explicitly provides the child with a means of talking about the language environment she encounters and directs her attention towards differences between the languages in general.

English being the easy way out appears to be a common cause for the lack of development in the community language. From the bilingual child's point of view, English speakers do not understand the community language, but all community language speakers she knows understand English. So, speaking Thai with English speakers in Australia is generally unsuccessful and consequently avoided, but if speaking English with Thai speakers does not cause problems for the interaction, why should she avoid an English word when it comes to mind first. If that attitude persists, than English will be increasingly more accessible than Thai, and soon the child will find it harder and harder to express herself in Thai. The way to avoid this is not to allow the use of English to be the easy way out when the communication contract specifies the use of the community language. Sequences like the one illustrated above do just that: they delay the ongoing interaction and focus on the language contract. Soon the child will realise that abiding by the language contract is more successful from the point of smooth interaction.

Another very important aspect of example (1) is that the child is actively involved in the repair sequence. This way the adult can be sure of the child's attention, and the fact that he has to repeat the term makes it more likely that he will be saying *Flugzeug* next time around. All learning is most successful when the learner participates actively.

As the adult becomes confident that the child knows a particular community language term even if she has chosen the English equivalent, it is possible to simply ask for "the Daddy word" or the German, Greek or Italian word, or whatever the particular language the child is expected to

speak. Then the child can provide the translation herself. At this point it would even be possible to play a game of "I don't understand you when you speak English with me".

If the child refuses to provide a self-translation, the language contract can be made explicit once again. If the refusal continues it is best for the adult to revert to modelling what the child should have said in the community language and requesting a repetition of the model before the on-topic interaction is resumed. The child is likely to find frequent inconveniences of this type motivation enough not to use English where the language contract specifies the use of the community language.

It is possible, of course, that what seems like a refusal to the adult is a genuine inability of expressing herself in the community language. It is very important not to expect the child to do things she cannot yet do. This would not only be frustrating to the child and a threat to the relationship between the adult and the child, but also totally counterproductive to the acquisition of the community language. Therefore modelling in the community language and requesting a repetition of the model is a very important measure. This technique has the advantage of being appropriate irrespective of the underlying reason for the child not to use the community language. It provides the necessary input if the child genuinely does not know, it reminds the child who has forgotten, and it inconveniences the child who chooses to be stubborn.

While self-retrieval is best for future language facility, repeating an adult model is a useful alternative. The adult needs to find a good medium between not frustrating the child and allowing the child enough time to retrieve the lexical item or grammatical structure herself before proceeding with the modelling sequence.

It is important, however, not to frustrate each and every attempt the child makes at communicating. Targeting a few very persisting vocabulary items is usually enough to motivate the child to pay closer attention to words as well as structures in the community language.

CONCLUSIONS

Knowledge of and facility in the community language are closely related to how often the child hears *and* uses the community language. Family day care providers with appropriate community language skills can contribute significantly to parents' attempts at raising children bilingually if they are aware of the importance of consistency of language choice, child-centred language use, and communicative need for speaking the community language. In the absence of large communities and speakers who are monolingual in the community language, these three principles can be invoked through appropriate communication strategies.

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