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## **Establishing a Bilingual Home: Parents' Perspective on the Effectiveness of the Adopted Communication Strategies**

### **Abstract:**

This paper examines strategies and ways of communication adopted by bilingual families who have been raising their offspring with more than one language. We analyse the results of a survey carried out in 32 families, looking at the strategies of communication adopted, parents' assessment of their effectiveness, and whether the respondents would have changed or improved anything if they had been given a "second chance". The results showed that the most frequently implemented method was the one parent-one language strategy, whose usefulness the majority assessed very positively. Other interesting conclusions concerning bi- and multilingual upbringing are also discussed.

### **Introduction**

It is generally believed that children acquire languages with ease, especially in favourable conditions (P. Lightbown 2008), and young learners (up to around age 7) proceed differently in their acquisition of the second language from older ones (*cf.* e.g. E.M. Hatch 1978, A. Wehren/ R. DeLisi/ M. Arnold 1981, G.-Q. Liu 1991, G. Cook 2000, M. Nicholas/ P. Lightbown 2008). One of the ways in which children can become bi-/multilingual is being born in a bi-/multilingual family. An increasing number of people choose to spend their life with a person of a different nationality, who very often also speaks a different mother tongue. A child brought up in such an environment is exposed to two or more languages from the very beginning, and thus acquires the necessary input in a natural way.

There are numerous ways of communicating in a family which may contribute to the child's success in acquiring multiple languages. Since parents constitute a source of both linguistic and cultural input for their children, it is imperative that they adopt well thought-out strategies of communication. However, which strategies are the most favourable for children in the process of bilingual upbringing? What actions should be taken by parents to let their children develop linguistic competences in both/more languages? These are the issues that will be tackled in this paper.

We first provide some general background information on the most prevalent topics in child bilingualism, namely the developmental effects of early bilingualism on the growing person and the course of the linguistic development of bilingual children,

dispel some widespread myths and misconceptions surrounding the notions of bilingualism and bilingual education, and enumerate the most common types of strategies that parents may adopt in raising their children bilingually.

Finally, we present the results of a questionnaire conducted among parents raising their children bilingually. Its aim was to find out what strategies parents usually adopt, how they assess the usefulness of these strategies, and whether they would have changed or improved anything if they had been given a “second chance”. The conclusions not only make it possible to establish which strategy is perceived by parents as the most effective, but also to determine what may be the key to successfully raising bilingual children.

### 1. Definition of bilingualism

The most basic definition describes bilingualism as “the use of at least two languages either by an individual or by a group of speakers.” A bilingual is characterised as “a person who knows and uses two languages” (but not “two monolinguals in one person”, a view that used to be formerly popular; C. Baker 2011: 9).<sup>1</sup> Although some may think that being bi-/multilingual involves “perfect” knowledge of both languages, most linguists nowadays tilt towards less rigorous expectations (especially given differential, probabilistic success even in native bilinguals, as opposed to guaranteed, categorical success in all-healthy-monolinguals; L. Ortega 2014). D. Crystal points out that “people who have perfect fluency in two languages do exist, but they are an exception, not a rule” (1987: 362). F. Grosjean stresses the importance of frequency, defining bilinguals as “those who use two or more languages (or dialects) in their everyday lives” (2010: 22).

In the case of childhood bilingualism the question arises when exactly the acquisition starts. Some think that it only begins at birth, when it becomes possible for the baby to listen to others. Contrary to this common belief, language acquisition commences already at the foetal stage, as the preborn child begins to respond to sound around the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> week of gestational age, and after birth the infant is immediately able to differentiate the mother’s voice from others and to discriminate sounds (C. Baker 2011: 95).

As far as early linguistic competencies are concerned, infants who are raised bilingually and monolingually do not respond to the language in the same manner (L. Bosch/ N. Sebastián Gallés 1997). Not only are four-month-olds capable of recognising the familiar language, but also respond differently according to the language spoken to them, which is reflected in the latencies of the responses (*op. cit.*:63). During the babbling stage (around 10-12 months) a child being raised in a bilingual environment tends to babble in her/his stronger language, but still shows the ability to distinguish both languages (B. Maneva/ F. Genesee 2002). Two-year-olds and even younger children are proficient enough to adjust the language to the situation or person and capable of switching between them fluently (C. Baker 2011: 96). However, it is not possible to precisely pinpoint the age of separation of languages, as this varies considerably and depends on many factors, such as linguistic input, patterns

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<sup>1</sup> “Bilingualism” and “Bilingual” entries in J. C. Richards, J. Platt/ H. Platt (1992: 35*f.*, 238*f.*).

of interaction – not only within the family, but also outside – the child’s self-awareness, personality, general competencies, and ability to adjust (*ibid.*). The choice of language may also be affected by sociolinguistic factors – the norms, values and beliefs of a given community (*op. cit.*: 97).

## 2. The benefits of bilingualism

For many parents who are wondering whether they should raise their children bilingually, the arguments for and against are of great importance in making the decision. Bilingual children differ considerably from their monolingual peers (A. De Houwer 2009, V.C.M. Gathercole/ E.M. Thomas 2009, E. Bialystok et al. 2010), and there are some skills where it is the latter who win out (M. Paradowski 2011: 341). For instance, bilingual children score lower in vocabulary tests in either language (D.K. Oller et al. 2003, L.C. Lin/ C.J. Johnson 2005), although this vocabulary deficit only concerns home and not school words and the difference level is at approximately 10% (E. Bialystok et al. 2010). Their lexical access (e.g. in picture naming tasks) is slower (albeit by only around 40ms in their L<sub>1</sub> and 80-100ms in L<sub>2</sub>; I. Ivanova/ A. Costa 2008), vocabulary recall slightly worse, and they experience the ‘tip-of-the-tongue’ phenomenon more frequently than persons speaking one language (T.H. Gollan/ N. Silverberg 2001, T.H. Gollan/ L.-A.R. Acenas 2004: 260). Finally, bilingual children are later to develop some syntactic structures (E. Nicoladis 2006). All these phenomena are to be expected given the necessarily relatively smaller input in each language and the necessity to resolve lexical conflicts and inhibit the competing language (M. Paradowski/ A. Bator/ M. Michałowska, 2016). In terms of the vocabulary and grammatical score, the children normally manage to catch up with their peers, while the delay in lexical access is negligible in everyday situations.

For a long time bi- and multilingualism and bilingual education were considered disadvantageous (*cf.* K. Hakuta/ R.M. Diaz 1985, C. Baker 1988, J. Cummins 2000, U. Jessner 2006, 2008). People believed that learning more than one language from birth would be detrimental to both linguistic and cognitive development (U. Jessner 2008: 15) and consequently lead to poorer results at school. The prejudice goes back to studies of bilingual children that had been carried out between the 1890s and 1950s and suggested a ‘language handicap’ or linguistic ‘confusion’ (J. Diamond 2010: 332) affecting children’s intellectual development and resulting in poor academic performance (S.S. Laurie 1890, I. Epstein 1905, D.J. Saer 1922, M.E. Smith 1931, V.T. Graham 1925, S.L. Wang 1926, M. Rigg 1928, H.T. Manuel/ C.E. Wright 1929, J.G. Yoshioka 1929, R. Pintner 1932, E.M. Barke 1933, S. Arsenian 1937, A.J. Mitchell 1937, E.M. Barke/ D.E. Parry-Williams 1938, W.R. Jones/ W.A. Stewart 1951, N.T. Darcy 1953, U. Weinreich 1953, W.R. Jones 1959, J.E. Kittel 1959, B.M. Levingston 1959, J.V. Jensen 1962, J. Macnamara 1967, *cf.* K. Hakuta/ R.M. Diaz 1985). However, these studies suffered from numerous grave methodological problems (M. Paradowski 2011: 332f): i) focusing on immigrants or inhabitants of economically underdeveloped rural regions (such as Welsh bilinguals in Great Britain, immigrants in the United States, or Francophones in Canada), while their monolingual peers were typically raised in families of relatively higher SES, ii) phrasing the tests in the participants’ less-fluent second language, iii) using monolingual standards as measures, iv) inclusion

of culture-bound items in the tests, and v) a political bias, as the aim of many of the studies was to bolster the respective governments' anglicisation policies towards immigrants and minorities (C. Baker 1988, J.V. Edwards 2004). Little wonder therefore that incipient research ignoring all the pertinent socioeconomic factors was only corroborating the prevalent pernicious stereotypes considering users of two or more languages as linguistically or even intellectually inferior 'second-class' citizens. It was only with E. Peal and W. E. Lambert's rigorous landmark (1962) study carried out on Canadian schoolchildren that this negative outlook on bilinguals' mental abilities was reversed and bilinguals' advantage on measures of both verbal and nonverbal intelligence began to be widely recognised and researched. Since then, studies have been consistently showing that, despite the few aforementioned handicaps as well as some common myths and misconceptions (*cf.* M. Paradowski/ A. Bator/ M. Michałowska 2016), there are numerous benefits which a child may gain from being bilingual, and that bilinguals outperform monolinguals on a range of verbal and non-verbal tasks (*cf.* e.g. C.E. Moran/ K. Hakuta 1995, D.W. Robinson 1998, G.R. Tucker 1998, M. Paradowski 2011, Z. Wodniecka/ A. Haman 2013). Everyday use of two or more languages has a very beneficial impact on the individual, which does not concern exclusively linguistic knowledge. Bi- and multilingualism can have many long-lasting personal, social (L. Arnberg 1987, E. Bialystok/ L. Senman 2004), cognitive, academic, professional, and financial (P. Gándara 2015) benefits.

Bi- and multilinguals display numerous advantages that enhance the quality of their everyday lives. It has been proven that they are better listeners and boast more acute memories and augmented abilities to categorise and parcel up meanings. They are also characterised by superior cognitive flexibility and reinforced problem-solving capacities due to the ability to look at the issue from a broader perspective (e.g. E. Bialystok/ D. Shapero 2005), which also influences their perception of the world. They obtain better results in Theory of Mind tests, measuring the ability to take on another person's perspective. Multilinguals, who are particularly open-minded, are more aware and understanding of different cultures. Hence, it is less likely that a multilingual would manifest any form of intolerance, for example racism or xenophobia. Additionally, they benefit from all the practical advantages that result from using more than one language. Not only does the ability to use numerous languages permit interactions that would otherwise never be possible, but also enables the realisation of many career paths unavailable for monolinguals.

Being multilingual considerably affects all of the known languages. The mother tongue benefits significantly – bi- and multilinguals are more proficient and efficient communicators in their first language. They are also better able to separate meaning from form and able to apply some linguistic skills that are out of reach of a monolingual: transferring, borrowing and code-switching.

Bi- and multilinguals are also more proficient *learners* of other foreign languages (J. Cenoz 2003). They acquire languages faster and, what is more, obtain better results in oral and written tests. This advantage can have different sources. First and foremost, they are capable of developing a higher level of metalinguistic awareness (J. Cummins 2000, E. Bialystok 2001, U. Jessner 2006, K. King/ A. Mackey 2007, A. Ewert 2008, C. Baker 2011); namely, they are more aware of the ways in which the language

works. Additionally, as they already know more than one language, they can establish connections between words, sounds and structures (especially when the languages concerned resemble each other). Finally, as already mentioned above, bi- and multilinguals communicate more efficiently in their first language, which is also helpful in the acquisition of another foreign language (J. Cenoz 2003).

Due to the frequent switching between their languages and having to inhibit the irrelevant language in cases of lexical conflict, bi- and multilinguals constantly and unconsciously practise executive functioning – the ability to focus attention on the right action at the given moment. They are thus faster in tasks requiring cognitive control (processes responsible for inhibition, goal maintenance, task switching, response selection, and conflict monitoring; (cf. e.g. E. Bialystok et al. 2004, E. Bialystok/ M.M. Martin 2004, E. Bialystok/ D. Shapero 2005), better able to detect conflicting information, more resilient to distractions, better at ignoring irrelevant information and focussing only on what is pertinent to a particular task (A. Costa/ M. Hernández/ N. Sebastián-Gallés 2008).

Cognitive control engages the prefrontal cortex, whose ontogenetic development is slow, and which is vulnerable to ageing processes. Unsurprisingly therefore, regular use of more than one language being a constant practice for the brain, if maintained throughout the lifespan it has been shown to bring long-term health benefits for adults and the elderly (e.g. E. Bialystok et al. 2004, Z. Wodniecka et al. 2010, S. Moreno et al. 2010, L. Tao et al. 2011, A. Marzecová et al. 2013), sustaining cognitive functioning and delaying the onset of symptoms of dementia. Recent studies (E. Bialystok/ F.I. Craik/ M. Freedman 2007, A. Alladi et al. 2014) reveal that bilinguals typically display the first symptoms of Alzheimer's disease over four years later than their monolingual counterparts, and that they are more than twice as likely to retain normal cognitive functions after an ischemic stroke, compared with patients who only speak one language (A. Alladi et al. 2015).

### **3. Early development of bilingualism**

#### **3.1 Environment**

The process of language acquisition begins before birth (C. Baker 2011: 95) and lasts the whole life. It is possible to commence the acquisition of more than one language at any time, but a crucial role in this process is played by the environment. As F. Grosjean highlighted, in order to maintain the individual's linguistic abilities, it is necessary to sustain constant contact with the language, both receptively via exposure and productively via opportunities for active use (2010: 22, M. Paradowski, C.-C. Chen/ A. Cierpich/ Ł. Jonak 2012).

Children are exposed to languages wherever they are – not only at home, but also in the street, nursery, elementary school or wider community, which are called “micro” environments (C. Baker 2011:93). Hence the acquisition of languages is always accompanied by the important social and political context, which includes community, country and culture (*ibid.*). Depending on the situation, a person has to face different expectations and pressures, more or less intensified. The process of education is strongly influenced by issues such as the “micro” environment as well as class affiliation and status of the majority or minority languages (*ibid.*).

The environment may serve as an aid for parents, since they can use the opportunities it provides and adjust them to their needs. They can decide to take responsibility and introduce more than one language already in the household, before formal schooling, or they can delay the beginning of the process and let the child learn the new language from peers in the street or at school.

The perfect opportunity to establish a bilingual household is a situation in which the partners have different nationalities and mother tongues. Nevertheless, the dream to raise a bilingual child is also attainable for parents who do not use two languages on a daily basis. If it is possible to expose a child to two or more languages, all parents are capable of succeeding as long as a big dose of motivation and determination is involved (B.Z. Pearson 2008:123).

While it is generally believed that children acquire languages quickly and with ease, especially when the process begins at a very early age, sometimes even a natural bilingual environment might not suffice. Also, comprehension does not go together with production. One of the most crucial factors determining the languages the child will speak is the parental language input patterns (A. De Houwer 2007).

A. De Houwer (2007) tried to find out why not all children exposed to two languages from a very young age are capable of actively using them. Her data was collected in Flanders, a region of Belgium where Dutch is the official and majority language, but which is known for high ethnic variety and the presence of many immigrants, and whose history also shows the importance of French in the area. The outcomes revealed that parents' active use of the minority language at home does not necessarily result in the children actively using it.

Two patterns turned out to be the most successful in transmitting the minority language: both parents using only the minority language, or one speaking only the minority language and the other using both (thus, the use of the majority language by one of the parents does not threaten the transmission of the minority language, if the latter is still used by both parents). The least successful patterns are where one parent spoke the majority language and the other used both languages, and when both parents spoke both languages – over one quarter of these cases failed to transmit the minority language. Interestingly enough, A. De Houwer's findings showed that the formerly praised *one parent – one language* method is “neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition” in transmitting the minority language (2007: 420).

One more important factor may be the “principle of maximal engagement with the minority language” introduced by M. Yamamoto (2001: 128), which claims that the more dedicated the child is to the minority language, the greater her/his chances of actively using it. This may explain the existence of families where the child fails to use the minority language at home despite the provided input.

### 3.2 Types of childhood bilingualism

Some children begin the acquisition of languages almost immediately and become bilingual quickly; in other cases the beginning of the process is delayed. Childhood bilingualism can thus be divided into two types, *simultaneous* and *sequential* (C. Baker 2011:94). The former, also referred to as *infant bilingualism*, *bilingual acquisition*, and *bilingual first language acquisition* (*ibid.*), can occur for example when the parents

apply the *one parent – one language* strategy, namely one parent uses one language while communicating with the child, and the other parent another language. Hence, the child is supposed to acquire the languages simultaneously and show a similar proficiency in both. *Sequential bilingualism* may occur when the child starts to attend nursery or primary school where a different language than his or her mother tongue is spoken.

#### 4. The questionnaire

In this section we present the results of a questionnaire conducted among 32 families raising their children bilingually.

##### 4.1 Methodology

###### (1) Purpose

The aim of the questionnaire was to find out what strategies parents usually adopt to raise their children bilingually, how they assess the usefulness of these strategies, and whether they would change or improve anything if they were given a “second chance”. Another rationale behind the questionnaire was to establish what measures parents usually implement to enhance their children’s language development and what they perceive as the key to success in raising children bilingually.

###### (2) Measuring instrument

The questionnaire was available online in two parallel language versions: English and Polish. It consisted of four parts altogether including 18 predominantly open-ended questions. The first two parts of the questionnaire were partially based on a survey used by A. Dorn de Samudio (2006) in her research on the discourse strategies implemented by English-Spanish bilingual families. The remaining two sections consisted of exclusively open-ended questions so as to let the parents fully refer to the issues associated with child bilingualism.

###### (3) The families

The questionnaire was completed by either the mother or the father from 32 bilingual families. In all the families both parents had different native languages. In 24 families (75%) the language of one of the parents was the dominant language of the community, whereas in the remaining 25% of the families the dominant language was different from either of the parents’ languages.

It is important to note that in 30 families (94%) both parents had higher education. This fact was reflected in the types of their professions. Not only did 20% of them hold senior positions such as that of a chief executive officer, marketing director or manager; they were also doing jobs which enjoy universal recognition, e.g. scientist, engineer or university professor (34%).

The bilingual families that completed the questionnaire come from all corners of the world. The majority (59%) live in Europe: Czech Republic (4), Great Britain (3), Poland (2), Switzerland (2), Italy (2), Belgium (1), Denmark (1), Germany (1), Lithuania (1), France (1), and Spain (1). 9 families come from the USA and 2 from Canada. The remaining two families come from Taiwan and Israel.

It is also important to note that the majority of the families (51%) live in cities which have a resident population above 100,000, whereas only 4 families (13%) come from towns with a population of up to 10,000.

## 4.2 Results

### 4.2.1 The role of parents in children's language development

In the initial stage of the child's language development, parents constitute the main source of linguistic input. The respondents were asked to determine how many hours they spend with their child/ren in their languages on a daily basis in the activities such as playing, reading, meals, watching TV, films, etc., and outdoor activities. In-between the parents, there were in most cases strong correlations between the amounts of time spent on the particular activity types, with the exception of watching television (with a very weak value of .1888).

It is interesting to note that the amount of time that each parent devoted to the child determined to some extent the child's competences in either of the languages. The correspondence between the amount of time that the children spent with each parent and the dominant language was especially noticeable in the case of very small children (of up to 6 years of age). In the majority of the families in which the father's native language was the community language, whereas the mother was the minority language speaking parent, the children felt more comfortable using the language spoken by the mother, with whom they were spending more time. In the case of older children (above 6 years of age), the correspondence between the amount of time spent with each parent and the dominance of one language over another was less distinctive. This may have resulted from the fact that the children had more contact with the outside environment, for example by attending kindergarten or having more contact with the majority language-speaking peers.

The amount of time that each parent spends with the child in particular activities is not the only factor influencing the children's language development. What also plays an essential role is the language in which the parents communicate with each other. This was another issue that the questionnaire referred to. The respondents were asked to rate their linguistic skills in their spouse's language and *vice versa*. In the majority of the families (62%) both parents had some degree of competences in each other's language. In nine families (28%) the respondents described their own and their spouse's skills as advanced, whereas in 34% of the families one parent's level of competences was advanced and the other's intermediate. In 11 families (29%) only one parent had some degree of competences in her/his spouse's language.

The choice of the languages in which the parents spoke to each other to a large extent influenced communication in the whole family. More than half of the parents noted that the way they communicated was closely associated with the implemented strategy of raising the children bilingually. There were two things that all these families had in common. Firstly, in all of these families the language of one of the parents was also the language of the community. Secondly, all the dominant language-speaking parents had a high degree of proficiency in the minority language. What differentiated some of these families from others was the adopted strategy of communication. In the case of four families both parents decided to speak exclusively the minority language



to the children. In the remaining families, the parents spoke to each other in the minority language, but to the children in their native languages. Communicating with each other in the minority language worked to the children's advantage, as it increased their exposure to the minority language and helped balance the dominating influence of the language of the community.

#### 4.2.2 Strategies of communication in the family

There are several strategies available to parents wishing to raise their children with more than one language (M. Paradowski/ A. Bator/ M. Michałowska 2016). The most frequently encountered are: one parent-one language, minority language at home, initial one-language strategy, time and place, mixed, and other methods. These partly overlap with R. Kemppainen, S.E. Ferrin, C J. Ward and J.M. Hite's (2004) taxonomy of parental language and culture orientation: mother tongue-centric, bicultural, multicultural, and majority language-centric.

In the majority of the families (91%) the parents followed one particular strategy of communication to raise their children bilingually: 25 families (78%) implemented the one parent-one language approach, whereas in the remaining 4 families (13%) both parents spoke only the minority language to their children. Three families had adopted no strategy. A possible reason for such enormous popularity of the OPOL method was given by one of the respondents: the woman emphasized that adopting the one parent-one language approach was the most natural choice for her and her husband, as communicating in their own native languages enabled them to establish a close emotional relationship with their children.

When discussing any type of strategy, the issue of consistency arises. In the case of the one parent-one language approach, 36% of the respondents claimed that they were always consistent with the language choice when talking to their child/ren. Some gave very definite answers such as "yes, [the language choice] never changes", "we are always consistent with OPOL", or "strict OPOL". It is interesting to note that sometimes the matter of being consistent depended on the parent. For example, in a French-Dutch family living in Switzerland the mother (French) claimed that she did not have any problems with speaking exclusively in her language to her five-year-old daughter Selena; however, her husband (Dutch) had difficulties in remaining consistent since the very beginning. A possible reason may have been the fact that the family lived in a French-speaking community in which he was the only speaker of Dutch. Another example of father's inconsistency with the language choice could be observed in a Polish-Dutch family. Even though the mother always used Polish when communicating with her daughter, the father (Dutch) had problems with using only his native language and would occasionally switch to English, which was his and his wife's common language. This inconsistency was not approved by the daughter, who insisted on him speaking to her exclusively in Dutch. To some parents consistency in language choice was important to such an extent that they wanted to maintain it even in the presence of people who did not speak the languages used in the family. In a Spanish-Dutch family, for example, the parents explained to their English-speaking friends the language strategy adopted in their family so as to feel comfortable when

communicating with their children in their own languages and avoid alienating the other interlocutors.

Not all the parents claimed to be entirely consistent with the language choice when talking to their children. Out of the 25 families who adopted the one parent-one language strategy, the majority of the respondents (56%) admitted to switching languages depending on the circumstances or people present. For example, in an English-German bilingual family living in the United States, the parents were “very consistent 95% of the time, but flexible, depending on the situation.” They usually talked to their children in their native languages (the mother – in English, the father – in German), but every time non-speakers were present, they would switch to the language that everyone understood. In some families the way the parents communicated with their kids depended on the activity. For example, in a Polish-Spanish family living in Spain the mother (Polish) would switch to Spanish only when helping her seven-year-old daughter with homework. In all the other cases she tried to remain as consistent as possible and address her daughter exclusively in her native language.

Another factor which influenced parents’ consistency with the language choice was the children’s age. In a Polish-Chinese family living in Taiwan, the mother and father attached special significance to communicating with their children only in their native languages – Polish and Chinese respectively – when the kids were younger. As soon as Zosia (16) and Jan (11) became fluent in both languages, the parents adopted a less restrictive approach towards the language choice. When all members of the family participated in a conversation, the languages were used interchangeably. There were even situations in which the children “forgot themselves” and started conversing in Polish despite the father being present. In such cases the mother would ask them to switch to English or Chinese so as not to exclude him from the conversation.



Figure 1. Are you and your spouse always consistent with the language choice when talking to your child/ren?

In two families the parents admitted to not being very consistent in the language choice when talking to their children. Due to the fact that these were the families in which the language of one of the parents was the dominant language of the community, maintaining consistency was especially difficult for the minority language speaking parent. This difficulty was pointed out by one of the respondents, who said: “It is definitely an effort to keep speaking your mother tongue when you are surrounded by the other language”.

Another strategy that was adopted by 13% of all the families consisted in speaking to children exclusively the minority language. It was adopted only by those families in which the language of one of the parents was also the dominant language of the community. The main reason why the parents had decided to implement it was to balance the dominating influence of the majority language from the outside environment. In an English-Czech family living in the Czech Republic, for example, the parents consciously decided to expose their one-year-old son at the early stages exclusively to English. According to the minority language-speaking father, the boy would be surrounded by opportunities to hear and learn Czech as he was growing up, in pre-school and from his mother's family. As far as consistency with the language choice is concerned, in only one family did the parents admit to communicating with the child *exclusively* in the minority language. This family, in which the mother and the father were native speakers of Dutch and English respectively, lived in the United States. For that reason the language to which their child was exposed at home was Dutch. This example shows how determined parents can be in raising their children bilingually: in order to expose the child to the minority language as much as possible, the mother translated all the books to Dutch, which the father then read to the child. In the other three families, the parents' attitude towards consistency was not so strict. It turned out that especially the dominant language-speaking parents had problems with remaining consistent in communicating with the children only in the minority language. Very frequently the parents switched to their native languages when they wanted to include someone in the conversation or when discussing certain topics.

Out of the 32 families, three admitted to not adopting any strategy. In these families both languages were used freely, depending on the situation or participants. The lack of a specific strategy can be illustrated with the statement of one of the respondents: "We use whatever is at hand, depending on the language of the wider community and resources; we also rely on the wider family". In one of the families, the mother, a native speaker of Polish, emphasized that the one parent-one language strategy would not work in her family because the children knew that she can speak German.

#### **4.2.3 Additional aids enhancing children's language development**

Success in establishing a bilingual home depends to a large extent on whether the parents create sufficient opportunities for their children to use the minority language, and in what ways they are doing this. Many additional aids can significantly improve the child's competences in the less-used languages. In the majority of the families surveyed the parents relied heavily on additional support to enhance their children's bilingualism. 85% claimed to support the children's language development by using additional means both inside and outside the home. In only five families no extra aids in fostering bilingualism were used. Figure 2 illustrates in what way the parents tried to increase their children's exposure to the less-used language:

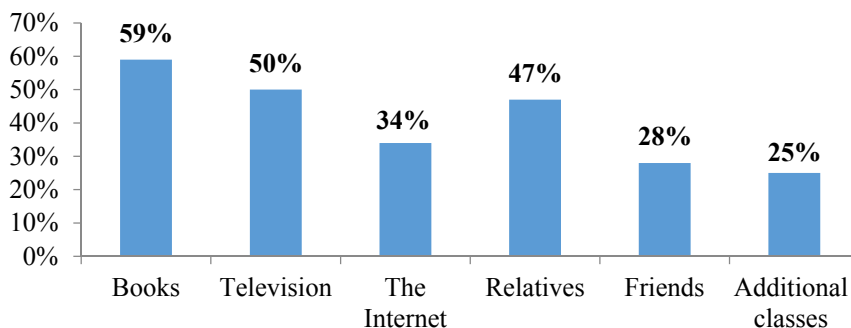


Figure 2. What do you do to support your child/ren's language skills in the less-used language?

As far as the aids used inside the home are concerned, as the best way to let their children have more contact with the minority language the majority of the parents (59 per cent) perceived reading books. One of the mothers stated that reading aloud to her son significantly improved his competences in English. Not only did the boy's vocabulary increase in this language, but it also became more sophisticated than his vocabulary in Czech, the dominant language. What might have contributed to the imbalance in vocabulary between the two languages was the fact that English was the only language in which the boy was being read to; the father (Czech) was suffering from dyslexia and found reading aloud very challenging.

What the respondents also perceived as an important factor enhancing their children's competences in the minority language was the use of multimedia, among which television and the Internet were the most frequently mentioned. 50% of the parents commented that watching films, cartoons or other TV programs considerably influenced their children's linguistic development. According to one of the minority language-speaking parents (Dutch), the variety of TV programs available on the market constituted for his son an "extremely valuable source of linguistic knowledge," as it enabled him to become acquainted with different styles occurring in speech. Another medium that was also perceived as a valuable aid in fostering bilingualism was the Internet. In 11 families (34%) the parents exposed the children to short films or songs in the minority language that were available on Internet websites such as *YouTube*. One of the respondents even provided a link to an Italian website<sup>2</sup> which promotes combining motor education with music when exposing the child to the language.

When trying to increase their children's contact with the minority language, the parents rely not only on additional aids such as books, television or the Internet, but also on human interaction. In 15 families (47%), the parents attached special importance to creating opportunities for their children to have contact with minority language-speaking relatives, either via computer programs such as *Skype*, or by visiting the members of the family in the minority-language country. For example, in the Polish-Spanish bilingual family living in Spain, the parents travel to Poland at least twice a year to enable their children more direct contact with Polish. Apart from visiting relatives, 28% of the respondents expressed the importance of providing the

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.chiacchiere-in-musica.it>

children with as many opportunities as possible to socialize with minority language-speaking peers. Out of the nine families who attached special significance to this way of enhancing bilingualism, four listed organizing special meetings with other families during which the children could improve their competences in the less-used language.

What the respondents also regarded as a useful way of supporting their children's bilingualism was additional classes in the weaker language. In eight families (25%) the parents decided to enrol their kids for instance in a Sunday school where the children were given an opportunity to practice their skills in the less-used language. In one of these families, the English-Czech bilingual family living in the Czech Republic, the children were not only attending additional classes in English, but they were also given extra lessons in this language at home by their mother. In another family, the parents mentioned additionally increasing their son's contact with the less-used language (Slovak) by sending him to a summer camp to Slovakia every year.

Only one family, apart from combining all the above-mentioned aids of enhancing the child's bilingualism, attached special significance to the role of the minority country's customs in supporting the child's language development. The mother (Polish) stated: *I avoid speaking in the community language to the children. They have been attending Sunday school since they were 4 and 3. We organize meetings with other families whose minority language is Polish. We travel to Poland at least twice a year and encourage friends to visit us. I read, sing and talk to my children and encourage them to communicate with our Polish family. We watch cartoons and films in Polish, visit Polish websites for children. We also follow Polish customs and cook Polish food. (mother, Polish)*

In five families (15%) the parents did not use any additional aids of enhancing their children's language development in the less-used language. Two respondents stated that there was no need for additional support as the children were equally exposed to both languages.

#### **4.2.4 Parents' conclusions and assessment of the adopted strategy**

In the questionnaire the parents were given an opportunity to reflect on the strategy of communication that they had been following. They were asked to assess the usefulness of the implemented method, as well as to consider whether they would change or improve anything in the bilingual upbringing of their children if they were given a "second chance".

As far as the one parent – one language strategy is concerned, out of the 25 families who followed this method the majority (88%) emphasized its usefulness by providing such answers as "so far excellent", "very useful", or "very effective". For example, in the Spanish-Dutch family living in the United States, the mother (Spanish) claimed that thanks to the OPOL approach her two daughters had become fluent in both Spanish and Dutch, and were praised by their teachers for the level of expertise that they had acquired in both languages. Another parent, the mother of 5-year-old Selena, stated that her daughter, thanks to being exposed to two languages (French and Spanish), did not have any problems with shifting from one language to another whenever the family went to the Netherlands, Spain or France to visit the relatives.

However, not all the parents clearly assessed the usefulness of the OPOL strategy. In three families the parents were not sure how to evaluate the method as their children were too young to give a clear answer (1), or mentioned problems they encountered (2). For example, one of the minority language-speaking parents, a native speaker of Serbo-Croatian, pointed out how uncomfortable and awkward she felt every time she addressed her children in her native language in public. Another respondent (Polish) living in Spain paid attention to the difficulty of remaining consistent all the time, especially when the minority language is not accepted by others. It is interesting to note that these less enthusiastic opinions about the one parent-one language strategy were expressed only in families in which the language of one of the parents was also the language of the community. In cases where both parents had different native languages neither of which was the language spoken by the community, only positive views about the OPOL approach were expressed.

Speaking exclusively the minority language to the child was also positively evaluated by the majority of the respondents. Only in one family did the parents find it difficult to assess the usefulness of this method as their child was “too young to draw any conclusions.”

The parents were also asked to consider whether the implemented method did not lead to any negative or unwanted consequences. As far as the one parent-one language strategy is concerned, there were only three families in which the parents clearly referred to the side-effects of the approach: the child’s limited vocabulary in either language as well as her/his reluctance to speak one of the languages. In 88% of the remaining families who had adopted the one parent-one language approach, the parents did not observe any negative or unwanted consequences. The positive opinion about the adopted strategy of communication was also held by those parents who decided to communicate with their children only in the minority language, who unanimously stated that the method worked to their children’s advantage.

Another issue the parents were asked to reflect on was whether they would change or improve anything in the bilingual upbringing of their children if they were given a “second chance”. More than half of the respondents (55%) were fully satisfied with the way they raised their children with two languages and would not introduce any changes. However, in comparison to the high percentage of the parents who positively assessed the usefulness of the adopted strategy and who did not observe any negative consequences of the implemented method, 86% and 90% respectively, there were still quite a lot of families in which the parents would have improved the way they established a bilingual home.

As far as the one parent-one language strategy is concerned, out of the 25 families who adopted this strategy of communication almost half of the respondents (48%) clearly expressed that they would change the way they raised their children with two languages. Most emphasized that had they been given a “second chance”, they would definitely have exposed their children more to the minority language. For example, one mother (Polish) stated that she would have done more reading so as to expand her children’s vocabulary in English. In another family, living in France, the father (English) assured that he would have tried to encourage his wife (French) to speak the minority language to their child. Apart from increasing the child’s exposure to the

minority language, some parents stated that they would have tried to be more consistent. In one of the four families in which both parents spoke the minority language to the child, a respondent stated that instead of establishing a bilingual home, he would have exposed their children to more languages.

#### **4.2.5 The key to successfully raising bilingual children**

The respondents were also asked what they perceive as the source of success in raising their children with two languages, and what they would advise other parents who want to establish a bilingual home. Out of the 29 families who adopted a particular strategy of communication, the majority (72%) as the key to success regarded consistency. Another frequently mentioned factor was motivation (52%). In the case of three families in which no strategies were adopted, the parents paid attention to the importance of providing the children with as many opportunities as possible to practise speaking both languages.

As other relevant factors contributing to success the majority (52%) of the parents who implemented the one parent – one language strategy regarded early exposure to both languages. One respondent stated that the parents constitute the main source of input for their children, therefore they should pay close attention to the way they speak. In ten families (40%) who followed the OPOL approach, the parents also recommended using additional aids enhancing the less-used language such as books (5), contact with the family and friends (3), television (1), and additional exposure to the weaker language outside the home, e.g. at school (1).

However, these are not the only pieces of advice with regard to raising children bilingually. One of the respondents highly recommended reading the latest books devoted to bilingualism, as he believes that the more parents know about this issue, the greater chance they have to achieve success. According to this parent's opinion, having theoretical knowledge about bilingualism and the process of bilingual upbringing helps the parents rationally assess the views held by some "professionals" who claim that the second language should be acquired only after the first has been relatively well established.

In one of the families, a Polish-Lithuanian bilingual family, the parents emphasized the importance of correcting linguistic errors in both languages. According to the mother (Polish), by doing so the child's sensitivity to what is different from the norm in both languages increases, as a result of which the child is less likely to make linguistic errors himself or herself. Another Polish mother, however, believed that concentrating exclusively on the language is not enough. The parents also have to expose their child to everything that stands "behind" the language, namely to the culture, literature and history.

Some of the parents emphasized how numerous benefits the child may gain from being bilingual. They described bilingualism as a "free gift" and "the best legacy" that the parents may give to their children to make them "true global citizens". Here are some of the statements in which the parents encouraged establishing a bilingual home:

It's a "free gift" we were giving them; you never know what situations life can bring where their language skills could become valuable. (mother, French)

It is great to offer this skill! Kids in Europe are speaking 5 to 7 languages. The world needs more than one language! The more the better! The future is for those who are prepared. (mother, Spanish)

Multilingualism is the future. It is the best legacy we can leave our children. It will set them up to be true global citizens. (mother, Dutch)

Some parents did not provide any piece of advice in the belief that there is no one “best” way to establish a bilingual home. This is what one mother (Icelandic) paid attention to: she stated that “different things work for different families”, as in each family the parents have different goals and expectations.

## 5. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to find out what strategies parents usually adopt to raise their children with two languages, how they assess the usefulness of the adopted strategy, and whether there is something they would have changed or improved if they had been given a “second chance”. Another goal was to establish what measures parents usually adopt to enhance their children’s language development and what they perceive as the key to success in raising a bilingual child.

The results showed that not only did the child’s competences in either language depend on the amount of time each parent spent with him or her in particular activities, but also on the language in which the mother and the father communicated with each other. The importance should be added here of both mother and father working as a team to facilitate their children’s bilingual language development (R. Chumak-Horbatsch 2008).

Another factor that plays an essential role in establishing bilingualism is the strategy of communication adopted by the parents. The majority of the respondents (91%) followed one particular strategy of communication, either the one parent-one language strategy (78%), or a method in which both parents spoke the minority language to the child (13%). In the case of only three families was no strategy adopted. The answers provided by the respondents also showed to what extent the parents were consistent with the language choice when talking to their children. In the case of the OPOL approach over half of the respondents admitted to having problems with remaining consistent. The parents were switching languages depending on the people present and other circumstances. Those parents who decided to communicate with their children only in the minority language also encountered several problems with remaining consistent. Especially the dominant language-speaking parents would find it difficult and frequently switch to their native language.

However, adopting a particular strategy of communication alone seems to be insufficient to raise a child with two languages. 85% of the respondents emphasize the importance of using additional aids enhancing bilingualism. The majority heavily rely on books (59%) and multimedia, among which television is the most popular. They also attach special significance to human interaction, namely to maintaining contact with relatives and creating as many opportunities for the children as possible to meet with peers speaking the less-used language.

The majority of the respondents emphasized the usefulness of the implemented method. Less enthusiastic opinions about the OPOL approach were expressed only in



those families in which the language of one of the parents was also the language of the community. 90% of the respondents did not observe any negative or unwanted consequences. Only in families in which each parent spoke her/his native language to the child did the respondents mention some side-effects, such as the child's limited vocabulary in either language or her/his reluctance to speak one of the languages. Even though the great majority of the respondents perceived the adopted method as very useful and did not observe any negative consequences, in almost 50% of the families the parents did express their willingness to introduce some changes. Most of the families who would improve their way of establishing bilingualism had adopted the OPOL approach. Had they been given a "second chance", many of them would have exposed their children more to the minority language.

As the key to success in raising a bilingual child, the most frequently mentioned factors were consistency in the choice of language when communicating with the child as well as motivation and creating for the children as many opportunities as possible to actively use both languages. It is important to note that more than half of the parents who had adopted the one parent-one language approach believed that the earlier the child is exposed to both languages the higher her/his chances of becoming bilingual.

There is no one "best" way of establishing a bilingual home. Every family is different and has different expectations towards bilingualism. This is what the results of the questionnaire showed: each family presented a different approach towards raising the child with two languages, and had different ideas of what contributes to success in establishing a bilingual home. However, there is one thing that all the parents had in common. What motivated them to raise their children with two languages was their children's success in the future.

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### Appendix: Questionnaire

The aim of this questionnaire is to find out what strategies parents usually adopt to raise their children bilingually, how they assess the usefulness of these strategies and whether they would change or improve anything if they were given a “second chance”. The questionnaire is anonymous and all replies will be used exclusively for scientific purposes. I would be very grateful if you would answer a few questions concerning the bilingual upbringing of your child/children. Thank you.

#### General information about the family

The person who answers the questions:  mother  father

1. What is your:
  - a. Native language? \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. Occupation? \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. Educational Level?  higher  secondary  elementary
2. What is your spouse’s:
  - a. Native language? \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. Occupation? \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. Educational Level?  higher  secondary  elementary
3. Which country do you live in?

\_\_\_\_\_  
Size of your current city/town/village (population):

4. Which languages do you speak in your family?  
MOTHER: \_\_\_\_\_  
FATHER: \_\_\_\_\_
5. How would you rate your language skills in your spouse’s language?  
 beginner  intermediate  advanced/ fluent
6. How would you rate your spouse’s language skills in your language?  
 beginner  intermediate  advanced/ fluent
7. In which language(s) do you and your spouse communicate? Does this change depending on the situation or certain people present? If so, please describe.

#### Information about children

8. Please list the given name, age (years and months), birth date, country of birth and gender of your child/children. Also indicate the age at which your child/children started to be consistently exposed to both languages.

	Name	Age (years/ months)	Country of Birth	Gender (M or F)	Age of consistent exposure to both languages

First child					
Second child					
Third child					

9. Roughly how many hours do you and your spouse spend with your child/children in your languages on a daily basis in the following activities?

	Playing	Reading	Meals	Watching TV, films, etc.	Outdoor activities
you					
your spouse					

10. How would you assess your child's/children's competences in both languages? Which language dominates?
11. Besides you and your spouse, are there any other influential adults in your child's life who contribute to his/her development of both languages (e.g. grandma, nanny)? If so, please describe who it is, what they do together and how much time your child/children spend(s) with these individuals?

*Strategies and ways of communication*

12. Which strategy of communication have you adopted (e.g. one parent – one language)?
13. Are you and your spouse always consistent with the language choice when talking to your child/children? Does this change depending on the situation or certain people present?
14. What do you do to support your child's/children's language skills in the less-used language?

*Reflecting on the adopted strategies*

15. How do you assess the usefulness of the strategy that you adopted in raising your child/children bilingually?
16. Did you observe any negative/unwanted consequences of the adopted strategy?
17. Is there anything you would improve or change in the bilingual upbringing of your child if you were given a "second chance"?
18. What do you think is the key to successfully raising bilingual children? What advice would you give to other parents who want to raise their child/children bilingually?