

Bilingualism in children with and without additional support needs – a parent's view

Susanne Shanks PhD

Abstract: This article describes personal experiences of bringing up our two daughters speaking English and German and aims to contribute to the discourse on bilingualism without relating to theoretical concepts. I will be raising similarities and differences in their linguistic development. They benefit from the same outer conditions (English-speaking father, German-speaking mother, living in Britain), but differ in their own pre-conditions. Mia, born in 2002, has always been at the upper end of the spectrum, picking things up quickly, using every possible opportunity, having a wide range of interests and generally being in very good health. Julia, on the contrary, was born in 2008 with breathing problems and has ongoing health issues as well as learning difficulties, resulting in being delayed in a variety of areas. The article will show how both able and disabled children benefit from being bilingual. It is based on observations as well as experiences and acknowledges the problem of remembering these without having taken notes at the time.

Keywords: bilingualism; cultural learning; inclusion

Our Family Situation

My husband Ewan and I met when we were both gaining work experiences during our course of studies. My professional background is in teaching, I studied English and German in Berlin and later worked at the University of London, where I taught German to undergraduates and completed a PhD in Comparative Literature. While linguistics was an important part of my studies, the article here is written entirely from a non-professional point of view with a purely personal interest. Likewise, Ewan's professional background as a primary school teacher does not contribute to the observations and ideas raised here. When we met in 1991, we spoke English to each other and this has remained our shared language, even though Ewan started learning German in evening classes and during frequent visits to Germany. Before studying business and a career in Human Resources he had spent time abroad and lived for a year in Holland. He learnt some Dutch there, which became useful when learning German.

Pre-conditions for Bilingual Families

I am including aspects of our personal background because I believe them to be important as a pre-condition for bringing up bilingual children successfully: tolerance from both speakers, especially if there are different levels of linguistic competence. The more experiences of language learning / exposure to foreign languages both speakers have, the higher seems to be this tolerance. Our local experiences include children who could have been raised bilingually, but struggle to actively speak the non-dominant language because of opposition based on prejudice or ignorance or a combination of both.

The other two essential pre-conditions for a successful bilingual education are consistency of the speakers and providing a variety of speaking opportunities for the non-dominant language. Parents need to stick to the language they speak with their child, particularly the speaker of the non-dominant language to communicate with the child in that medium. While an overlap from the local parent with the non-dominant language is often helpful, the adoption of the dominant language in conversation between child and 'foreign' parent very quickly shifts the 'power balance' between the languages and can hinder or even stop a bilingual development. The provision of speaking opportunities sounds banal but is essential, especially after children start school and spent only a limited time at home. Without frequent input of materials and resources, there is usually not enough lexical variety to actively increase the vocabulary of the children, which leads to limits in the usage of the language.

Our Experiences with Mia

Before I had children, I always assumed that it would be most natural to speak to your child in your mother language and when Mia was born in 2002 that was what I automatically did. We had agreed beforehand that we would raise our child bilingual but had never spoken about strategies or similar. In the first few weeks of excitement following the new arrival, we did not reflect much on it either – Ewan spoke a mix of English and German to Mia as he was also quite determined that she would be bilingual and it helped his German, too. I spoke German to her and amongst us parents we continued in English. When the midwife visited, I would speak to her in English, but when I turned to my week-old baby and continued in English, I got a startled look from her. At the time, I did not dwell on that, but it was repeated a few times in similar situations and I am convinced that Mia knew I wasn't speaking to her in the 'right' language right from the start. She is now 12 years old and it still feels strange when I am talking to her in English, although there are frequently situations demanding that, e.g. when she is with friends, at school, or in other social circles.

When Mia started speaking at about two years old, she initially mixed both languages, but soon differentiated and spoke German to me, her German grandparents and friends, a mix of both English and German with Ewan, and exclusively English to his parents and family as well as at nursery. She would sometimes question a word in the other language and started early to translate, particularly for her grandparents. I consistently spoke German to her, often read English books from the library in German to her, as did Ewan.

We very regularly went to Germany in order to visit my family – my grandmother was still alive and looked forward to our next visit, flights were cheap and child-care rather expensive. For Mia it meant that she had many speaking opportunities beyond our small family unit. When we were in Rostock, she attended the kindergarten with my best friend's daughter, which was a brilliant way of immersing herself in German language and culture. She learnt really quickly and looked forward to spending time with her friends. Her accent in German is non-regional, but she is able to put on a slight northern accent when she wants to. I always noticed her suddenly mixing in some more child-like phrases and expressions, or

her intonation slightly changing, mimicking the friends she spends time with. This usually stops as soon as we are back home in Scotland.

Interestingly, her English always becomes more pronounced when we are in Rostock – in phone calls with Ewan she started to use a more varied vocabulary and enunciates more clearly, which she does at home, when reminded of speaking clearly or when being in the company of eloquent speakers (drama classes or similar). Thus, being briefly exposed to only the non-dominant language has not only a direct impact on this language, but interestingly also an indirect one on the dominant one, which is possibly caused by different attention given to linguistic matters.

Bilingualism attracts quite a lot of attention from people who are not used to it. We regularly get comments on Mia being so clever because she is able to speak two languages. People sometimes tried to do her a favour by showing off their own linguistic skills and addressing her in the 'other' language. Mia always reacted by sticking to their 'original' language, e.g. when we are in Germany and a German friend tries to speak English to her, she replied straight away in German and vice versa with English speaking people trying their German on her. In the last couple of years, she has learned to be polite about this, but it is noticeable that she really enjoys the company of other bilingual children, for instance at the German church in Edinburgh (the German Speaking Congregation in Edinburgh to give it its proper name), where all participating children speak at least English and German and enjoy not only mixing the languages, but also being recognised in abilities beyond bilingualism.

When Mia was still quite young, at about 3 1/2 years old, she went to church with Ewan and during the service they sang a hymn that had been translated from German. Ewan tested her, by asking her to translate the hymn title, which Mia did, but then she hesitated and added, that it did not really say it in this way. She was trying to express, that the 17th century German title did not correspond with the modern day English translation she had given, without being able to identify register as the source, but her linguistic awareness was already so early in place that she knew the two versions meant the same, but expressed it differently. Similarly, when we went to visit friends in France at the age of five, we did not have to explain the concept of foreign language learning – she picked up little phrases, asked for words and tried to make herself understood with it.

Before Mia started school, I started to read books in English to her – she had realised that I was giving her approximations in German and wanted to hear the 'real' stories. I thought not much of it and brought home books from the local library where I had started to work on a Saturday morning. About three weeks later I realised that I had to encourage Mia to speak German, this happened more and more often and I quickly linked it to the increase in English at home and more importantly the decrease of German input. We very quickly back-paddled, the English books went back or were limited to Ewan reading to her, German books, DVDs etc. were brought in and it did not take long and the old linguistic balance was established. However, I was shocked to realise how little it took to upset it. We also noticed that when the gaps between visits to Germany get too big, which easily happens when you stick to school holiday dates, the efforts to keep the level of German up increase significantly.

Trying to counterbalance this, I have organised a German group in our area and we regularly run events for children (and started a book- and film group for adults). We are lucky that there are many German speakers in our area and in particular in the past few years the number has increased in the school my daughters attend (presently there are 12 German speaking children in a school of 85). The local council has reacted and enables me within my work at the local library to run monthly 'bookbug' sessions in German, which have been successful for the last two years and now includes a session for learners of German.

Mia's language competence in both English and German is that of a native speaker, although her vocabulary is much more developed in English. When she is speaking German, she often uses Anglicisms. Especially when talking about experiences within an English-speaking context this seems to be a typical interference commonly found in language communities abroad (and we adults are equally 'guilty' of this). And, of course, there is also a trend within Germany to use more English phrases and expressions, it is often regarded as 'cool' and at least Mia can be sure to be using it correctly and pronouncing it properly. Of course, I am aware of the dangers of oversimplifying language and am keen to widen her vocabulary in German.

The main hurdle has been the difference in reading competence over the past few years. Mia is an avid reader and reads books in English that are beyond the normal reading age of a 12-year-old. This makes the gap to German even more apparent. While she is capable of reading German and has read a few books so far, it does not come with the same ease as reading English and because of that, she does not do it as regularly and often and because of that she does not improve it much ... a classic 'Catch 22'-situation. Her written German is mainly self-taught, during the early stages of primary school I deliberately held back to avoid confusion between both languages, but I am aware that over the past few years we could have 'worked more' on her writing skills. On the other hand, it means she has not been pressurised in any way and it leaves us room to develop these skills over the next few years. It is our aim to improve her German to such a level that she can choose to live and/ or study in Germany as well as in Britain without standing out from her peers.

Our Experiences with Julia

When Julia was born in 2008, the situation was different from day one – despite a totally normal pregnancy and uneventful birth, there emerged health problems as we were getting ready to go home and Julia was admitted to the neo-natal unit, where she spent the first month of her life whilst doctors tried to get to the bottom of her breathing problems. When she was four years old, she was finally diagnosed with a genetic defect which leads to her cilia not beating and thus an inability to clear her lungs and airways, often causing infections. She has learned to live with this and has developed into a little girl full of life and character.

Her awkward start into life, however, has meant that several issues arose in regard to communication. While there was an instant bonding between me and Julia, centring on breastfeeding, she avoided contact with others for a long time. This was particularly hard on Ewan, who only started to communicate better with her after being given advice by Dr

Suzanne Zeedyk of the University of Dundee, which involved sticking his tongue out to her! From there on, their relationship developed much more normal. In contrast, her interaction with medical personal changed from an initial joyous recognition of uniforms resembling the blue of the neo-natal unit, to a phobia-like panic towards anyone wearing a medical looking uniform (including the ladies at Boots, the Chemist).

In terms of bilingualism, our approach with Julia resembled the one with Mia, the only difference being that I tried to ensure early on that the girls would speak German to each other. While they were younger, this worked really well, German was Julia's first language and both Ewan and Mia regularly spoke German with her. Now, with both girls at school, I have to remind them to speak German to each other, which they do, until they forget about it. This is a natural development of predominantly playing in English at school and after school with friends. However, if they were not reminded of playing in German, I am sure the 'power balance' would shift much stronger towards English.

Julia's medical problems have caused a knock-on-effect for her general development – she was delayed in every stage of her growing. Most notably, her speech was delayed by several years, which was mainly caused by poor hearing, caused by the built-up of liquid in her ears. This is fluctuating, making assessment difficult. We eventually searched around and organised an amplifier with headphones, which she wore for about five months before being issued with a hearing aid worn in a hairband. She has been wearing this for over a year now and it has made a huge improvement to her hearing and consequently her speaking. She is now not only able to respond better to questions directed to her, but she is also part of wider conversations around her (incidental hearing) and has discovered much more of the world around her. We are thankful for the support of the sensory unit, who has installed a sound system into her classroom, from which she benefits particularly at the early stage of primary school, when hearing the right sounds means being able to differentiate and learning to write these sounds properly.

Before we were aware of her hearing problems, we attended a playgroup at the psychology department at the University of Stirling and were part of an experiment analysing the impact of different means of communication in addition to spoken language. We were in the group adding sign language and it took a long time to learn some of the signs and there were only a few that Julia used consistently. When her hearing problems emerged, we had some speech therapists suggesting the use of Makaton¹, but we felt that it was more important to develop her ability to speak. We noticed that her delay was not just caused by having missed out on sounds. There appear to be issues with processing information, applying learned concepts and accessing information available to her. In order to overcome these problems, we feel that being bilingual is of particular benefit to Julia because it opens up two different systems upon which she can fall back on. Often, she switches between languages or mixes languages when she is looking for an expression or word, but this is a great step forward from using gesture or facial expressions in order to communicate. She is

¹ A language programme designed to provide a means of communication to individuals who cannot communicate efficiently by speaking (Wikipedia)

very evidently using the second language to bolster her word-finding abilities: she often generates a sentence and struggles to articulate it, so jumps into the other language, uses the word she needs, and then finishes the sentence, occasionally going back to translate the word when she finds it.

People who are not familiar with bilingualism, e.g. neighbours, acquaintances, have frequently commented on Julia's delay and suggested that we should not confuse her by speaking German as well as English. Doubt did briefly creep in when we saw her peers speaking happily and Julia still only using single words, some learned phrases, all at an age when she could have started school. Our first argument was simply based on family dynamics – we felt it wrong to have an older, bilingual daughter, and a younger daughter with additional support needs, who was not bilingual because she would not have been able to do so. We felt we were condemning her as incapable of learning a second language at a time when we weren't sure what her abilities were going to be. About 18 months after this point in her development, she now speaks both German and English, uses more complex structures and is generally much more happy and successful to communicate, although still not age-appropriate (like a 4-year-old instead of a 6 ½ year old).

Julia really enjoys her bilingualism and, like Mia, mentally registers people in one language and then sticks to that one language for communication – unless she is with other German-English speakers, in which case she randomly flits from one to the other. Julia also likes to translate for her Scottish family and regularly 'explains' to them what she just discussed with us in German.

Discussions with speech and language specialist, Educational psychologists in both the UK and Germany, and of course our own personal experiences indicate that the dual processing which goes on in a bilingual brain extends into all facets of Julia's communication and creates in her a problem-solving approach to getting her message across: if she struggles with (a), she tries (b), then (c), rather than being limited to (a) and expecting the recipient to be the one to find meaning, she expects to produce meaning (Interestingly, watching her play, she tries multiple ways of solving any problem before moving on).

Early on in our bilingual family life, Ewan had sometimes mentioned how the constant 'babble' of German in the background appeared at times to be a strain. But he always tolerated this, which I now know to be one of the main pillars of successful bilingualism. As a positive side-effect of that, his understanding of German has greatly improved over the past twelve years. However, the different intonation and sentence pattern of German still often leads to the impression that the girls and I are having a serious discussion, or even an argument, when all we are doing is talking about something as mundane as what to have for dinner.

In conclusion, we both believe that bilingualism has benefitted our children. They both enjoy communicating and while Mia has a vocabulary beyond her age, we suspect that Julia's language might not have developed quite so significantly had she not had the second language to support her.