Raising Children Bilingually in the United States

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Edited by

Iulia Pittman

Cambridge Scholars Publishing



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I would also like to thank all the contributors to this volume who made it possible to bring together so many inspirational stories on parenthood and bilingualism.

PREFACE

Growing up in Transylvania, Romania, made multilingualism a natural part of me. I was spoiled to be able to speak two languages (Hungarian and Romanian) at home and in the community and add a third language, German, by the age of three. As an adult, I immigrated to the United States and later became a mother myself. While I had a feeling that raising my children bilingually in the U.S. would not be as easy, I was not sure what to expect.

Even before my children were born, I heard stories about parents who, despite all good intentions, were not succeeding in raising their children bilingually. Once my children were born, and given that I was the only person speaking Hungarian to them in the home and the community, the challenges of other families became more real to me. Conversations with like-minded linguists, some of them contributors to this book, led to my desire to edit a volume on bilingualism.

The opening chapter in this volume, authored by me, starts out with some broad background information on the topic of bilingualism and moves on to several factors that play an important role in raising children bilingually in the U.S. Alex Sager (German, chapter 2), who learned German as an adult and decided to make a total switch from English to German with his son when he was two years old, employed the help of puppets to make bilingualism become part of his household. Christine Jernigan (Portuguese, chapter 3) writes an inspiring chapter filled with great advice for other parents who would like to teach their children a language that they learned as adults. A beautiful story about many languages and cultures, different parenting styles, high standards and flexibility, David Marlow's chapter (Chinese, chapter 4) is a great example of how everybody's family is unique. David Zuwiyya (Spanish, chapter 5), also a non-native speaker of Spanish, gives the reader insight into the vocabulary and grammatical features typical of bilingual children. Like in David Marlow's case, whose daughters are grown up, Aerin Benavides (Spanish, chapter 6), writes about her family's winding road to bilingualism and her three adult children who are all fluent in English and Spanish. Vera Lee-Schoenfeld (German, chapter 7) starts out with a few theoretical concepts and continues with a great deal of practical advice for other minority-language-speaking parents in the OPOL paradigm. Rachel Norman (Spanish, chapter 8) and Aerin Benavides (Spanish, chapter 8)

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conclude the volume with a chapter on a successful Spanish Saturday school in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

While all these authors have closed their chapters on bilingualism for this volume, I know that their life "chapters" on bilingualism will stay open for a long time. I sincerely hope for every family who wishes to raise children bilingually the best of luck, perseverance, and enjoyment on this rewarding journey.

CHAPTER ONE

ON MINORITY LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE IN THE UNITED STATES

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What the son wishes to forget the grandson wishes to remember.

—Marcus Lee Hansen

Introduction

This book is a collection of essays written from different perspectives on how to raise children bilingually in the United States. As we delve into the numerous factors that affect bilingualism, the different scenarios, and the various strategies that contribute to its success (for indeed the possibility of "failure" at raising bilingual children is constantly in view in the English-dominated U.S.), it is important to keep in mind that language use between parents and children "is a complex matter that is unique to each family." (Betty Yu, 2013) The exact formula for successfully raising bilingual children will be similarly unique to each household.

There is no question that being bilingual adds much to a person's life. Studies have found that bilingualism delays Alzheimer's (Gollan et al., 2011; Bialystok, 2011), that it helps with understanding abstract concepts better and from an earlier age (Adi-Japha et al., 2010), and that it enhances creativity (Leikin, 2013; Lee and Kim, 2011).

This chapter, like the following chapters in this volume, will focus on questions like why raising children to be bilingual is so unexpectedly difficult, what parents and children should expect, and what can be done to make the road to bilingualism smoother and more successful.

What is bilingualism?

To start, I believe it is important to take a closer look at the term bilingualism, the different types of bilingualism, and bilingualism around the world and in the United States.

Bilingualism, as defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, is "the ability to speak two languages." This definition is quite broad, and a brief look at the literature quickly reveals concepts such as **simultaneous bilingualism** (when a child grows up learning two languages at the same time and the same rate, also known as balanced bilingualism), **receptive bilingualism** (when a person can understand but not speak a second language), and **sequential bilingualism** (when a person learns one language after the other). We can also distinguish between **additive bilingualism** (when learning a second language does not interfere with the first one) and **subtractive bilingualism** (when the second language replaces the first language).

Not only do we find variation in the way two languages can be acquired by the same person, we also find great differences among bilingualism situations in the world. For instance, the experience of a Slovene person in Austria (who is part of a significant minority group in certain regions of the country) will be different from that of an American in China (where we need to consider that English is a global language and Chinese is fairly difficult to learn as an adult), and different still from that of a Latvian in Canada (where we probably find little community support for Latvian, and the pressure to assimilate is probably great). Similarly, Spanish-speaking families in Miami, Florida, have different experiences from Spanish-speaking families in Maine, and different experiences still from those of a Bulgarian family just about anywhere in the U.S. In studying these and other sorts of language interactions, linguists have summarized that some of the factors that play an important role in sustained bilingualism are language contact, status of the minority and majority languages, support in the community, exposure to and input from the minority language, and opportunity to spend time in the **minority** language country.

The 2009 issue of *Ethnologue*, a publication by Summer Institute of Linguistics International, distinguishes between nearly 7000 languages. These languages are spoken by over 7 billion people who reside in nearly 200 countries. From these numbers, it is clear that in many countries around the world, multilingualism is the norm. We see sustained multilingualism in plurilinguistic countries (e.g., Switzerland, Belgium) or

in countries where ethnic minorities have kept their minority language for numerous generations (e.g., Finns in Sweden, Hungarians in Romania).

Bilingualism in the U.S.

The vast majority of sociological research on language in the United States focuses on English acquisition and use rather than other-language maintenance. The prevailing assumption seems to be that bilingualism is a **transitional state**. Cline and Necochea discuss in their 1995 article the great importance of biliteracy, or dual-language proficiency. They acknowledge that

the politicization of the bilingual education debate frequently obscures the pedagogical and research findings supporting biliteracy and bilingualism.

Necochea and Cline (2000) further suggest that the education system in the U.S. should be restructured from a compensatory model (also known as the transitional model) to an enrichment model (also known as the maintenance model) (Hornberger, 1991).

The literature often talks about the "three-generation shift" that commonly occurs in the U.S. In this paradigm the parents are often adult immigrants, and their children can speak both English and the minority language, but the children's children can understand some but not speak the minority language anymore.

Though many minority-language-speaking parents in the U.S. have a strong desire to pass on their linguistic and cultural heritage to their children, they are often not prepared for the challenges that such an endeavor poses. The U.S. is known as a melting pot, and while the very definition of "American" embodies the intersection of several different cultures, languages, and ethnicities, the **assimilation process** into the American culture often takes place at a fast pace and at the expense of minority languages and cultures. Maybe more so than in other parts of the world, immigrant parents in the U.S. have strong instrumental and integrative motivations, to use Gardner and Lambert's¹ terminology, to learn the majority language. For many minority languages, there is often little linguistic and cultural support in the community, and pretty much any

¹ Gardner and Lambert (1959) define instrumental motivation as the desire of a person to learn a language in order to achieve better pay or higher status. Integrative motivation is defined as the desire of a person to learn a language in order to be able to understand the culture better and to identify better with the speakers of this language.

minority language will have a lower status than that of English. All these factors make the maintenance of a minority language difficult.

The next several sections look more in depth into some of the common **challenges** encountered on the road to bilingualism, some being more within our control than others. Following this, I will elaborate on several **solutions** to these challenges.

The dream, the reality, and the hard work

The truth is that we cannot drift towards bilingualism. Raising a child bilingually is a commitment, and parents need to be intentional about it at every turn. There are many challenges that parents face, some of them expected but some of them unexpected. Many are obvious and come on suddenly, and others are more subtle and gradual. Heraclitus' famous quote, "The only constant in life is change," that applies so well to any parent's experience raising children, gets a whole new meaning when these children are being raised bilingually. There are a lot of changes that parents need to know how to adapt to. And while resources for parents at every stage in their children's lives are abundant, specific information about how to raise bilingual children successfully is not so easily accessible

The dream of many families (whether articulated or simply assumed) is that by mere fact that one or both parents speak a minority language (and strongly identify with that culture), the language and minority language identity will rub off to the child(ren). Challenges are unexpected and the "linguistic highway" often splits into lanes to bilingualism, monolingualism, and other destinations somewhere in between. Exiting to monolingualism is often easier than staying on the road to bilingualism. Frequently, parents take the wrong turn without realizing what the consequences are. The reality is that raising children bilingually is not a smooth process and it does not happen automatically. It is a life-long commitment involving going out of one's way to create opportunities for the minority language's use. Difficulties should be expected, and there should be a plan to overcome them. While raising children bilingually involves a lot of hard work, awareness of what to expect is also an important factor in keeping many parents on the "highway." In the following sections, I will cover some typical obstacles in parents' plans for raising their children bilingually.

² Greek philosopher who lived between 535 and 475 BC

Factors to consider

Speech production in early bilinguals

A factor that often comes in the way of attaining bilingualism is (mis)information and (lack of) understanding of what is typical in the development of a bilingual child. It is still commonly thought that **speech** delays are typical of bilingual children. Hambly et al. (2013) conducted an extensive review of the literature on speech production in early bilingualism. While only limited evidence was found that bilingual children develop speech at a slower rate than their monolingual peers. more recent findings show that there are qualitative differences and increased variation in speech production when we compare bilingual and monolingual children. Moreover, research examining the linguistic characteristics of English language learners (ELLs) in the early stages of English acquisition has revealed striking parallels between bilingual children developing their language skills at age-appropriate speed and monolingual English-speaking children with language impairment (Paradis et al., 2008). Parents of children growing up speaking more than one language cannot be blamed for having anxiety over the fact that their child does not speak as well or as early as other children who are at the same age. Coupled with the fact that even educators and doctors will still sometimes tell parents not to speak the minority language because it will "confuse" the child, the battle for bilingualism can be lost before it has even started.

Tip for parents: without ignoring potential real speech impairment problems, parents should not be alarmed if their children show different patterns of language acquisition than their monolingual peers. Parents of bilinguals should continue speaking consistently to them in the minority language.

Social factors

It is not uncommon for children, who have been comfortably balancing two languages from birth, to start showing preference for English once they start **preschool**. This is a time when bilingual children both feel the necessity to learn and speak the majority language and experience a tremendous increase in exposure to this language. Furthermore, what happens during this time is that children learn and get used to playing with other children in the majority language. That is also the reason why siblings often speak the majority language among each other, even if the

home language is the minority language, and they separately speak the minority language to their parent(s). As it turns out, peer influence is already greater than parents' influence in preschool-aged children. (Altman, 2014)

Tip for parents: The first time your child addresses you in English, do not respond until s/he repeats what was said in the minority language. You may have to explicitly say in the minority language "Please repeat what you said in [the minority language]." Do not be discouraged if the child goes through a phase when s/he shows preference for English and the English-speaking parent.

The next big milestone is the middle school years. Caldas (2008) has done some interesting research on his three children (one boy and two twin girls, who are two years younger than their older brother) whom he and his wife raised bilingually in English and French. They were able to offer a lot of input and minority-language contexts for their children, such as consistently speaking French at home, spending approximately two months each summer in French-speaking Quebec, and enrolling the children in a French immersion program. But despite all these opportunities and efforts, when they were at middle-school age, the children had a very negative attitude towards their bilingualism. They refused to speak French and felt embarrassed when addressed in French around their friends. Nevertheless, only a few years later, they embraced their bilingualism, their language proficiency improved, and they were more comfortable with their bilingual identity. In general, the children valued their bilingualism and biculturalism much more as older adolescents and young adults than as younger adolescents. Caldas found that the initial rejection came due to peer pressure in early adolescence and that, as they moved toward identity-achievement, the children also exhibited greater bilingual self-confidence and diminished self-consciousness as older adolescents. This rediscovery and change in attitude towards bilingualism in postadolescence is supported by findings in studies by Woolard (2011) and Shi and Lu (2007) who found that maturation reduced the feelings of shame and intolerance of difference that inhibit adolescent second language use.

We find support for these authors' observations in the language socialization paradigm, which specifically addresses the issue of how individuals use language to situate themselves with respect to others and acknowledges the dynamic relationship between children and the communities within which their languages develop (Garrett and Baquedano Lopez, 2002). The child's sense of this language community can become so strong that it almost becomes an "invisible presence" in home life, making adolescents very self-conscious of their behavior

(Hudson and Gray, 1986). Group socialization theory explains well what occurred in the Caldas family: the children were adapting to and assimilating the norms of their outside-the-home peer groups, which had a greater effect on their behavior (language choice, in this case) than the home environment (Harris, 1995). This idea of "the imaginary audience," a term introduced by Elkind and Bowen in 1979, is interesting and insightful, and certainly explains behavior that often goes beyond language acquisition.

Tip for parents: Armed with knowledge of the "imaginary audience" that adolescents feel, parents of U.S. bilingual children should continue being consistent in not allowing English to be an option between them and their children.³ They may want to start talking early with the children about the positive aspects of speaking another language and helping them feel proud of their multilingual background.

Consistency

Lack of consistency is another factor that allows for minoritylanguage loss. There are several paradigms for raising children bilingually. The most common ones are the one-parent-one-language paradigm (OPOL) or the minority language at home paradigm (MLAH) paradigm. In some families, both parents are native or fluent speakers of a minority language, and they worry that their child will not be integrated and will not function well in the English-speaking society. They introduce English at home in order to ease the child's integration process. However, while the intentions are good, usually when one parent speaks two languages to a child, confusion is created. This is particularly the case if the minoritylanguage parent is the main source of input for the minority language. As it turns out, children require a solid association with any given language. When one parent mixes the child's first language (L1) and second language (L2), it weakens the language-to-person association that the child needs so badly. Once this association is weakened and children realize that it is an option for them to speak the majority language with the minoritylanguage-speaking parent, a typical next step is for children to start speaking the majority language to the parents (even while the parents continue speaking the minority language to them). Once we open this door, attrition of the minority language will come fairly quickly. Sometimes this shift happens despite the parents' consistently speaking the minority language with the child. While the shift is initiated by the child

³ I believe that one exception to this can be when helping with homework.

(as mentioned in the previous section, often due to peer influence), the parents frequently give in too easily and begin speaking English themselves with their child.

Tip for parents: Be consistent in addressing the child and being addressed in the minority language.

Literacy and support in the community

A factor that can greatly contribute to successful bilingualism is **literacy** in both the majority and minority language during the critical elementary school years. For languages where schooling is an option, it is important to understand what role this plays in bilingual children's linguistic and cultural development. A study on Japanese Saturday schools in a large metropolitan area in the U.S. suggests that we need to approach heritage-language education not merely as an effort to enhance awareness of one's heritage or an instruction in language but also as a schooling process, in which what constitutes legitimate knowledge and legitimate ways of attaining it are contested (Doerr and Lee, 2009).

Furthermore, studies around the world (Dixon et al., 2012; Pearson, 2007) have found a direct correlation between minority-language proficiency and ethnic residential concentration. Lack of community support has been recognized by many researchers (Kirsch, 2012; DeCapua and Wintergerst, 2009) as an important hurdle in maintaining the minority language. And in the U.S., only a relatively small percentage of all minority languages have strong support in the community. All other languages have to compensate for this absence of community support via extra minority-language input. But there is a way to at least partially make up for lack of community support. Venables et al. (2014) conducted a study on several OPOL families and found that the attitude and support of the majority-language-speaking parent towards the minority language has an important effect on the acquisition of the minority language. Cunningham-Andersson and Andersson (1999, 3) conclude that "If the other parent does not support the minority language it will be almost impossible to make it an active part of family life." In other words, an important factor that can determine the level of success for the minoritylanguage maintenance is the degree to which the majority-language parent is on board and has a positive attitude.

Tip for parents: Seek out opportunities for exposure to the minority language in the community, be it through formal instruction, social interactions, or your family.

Creating minority-language contexts

The **contexts** in which events occur highly affect the way in which we organize our thoughts and our language output. In other words, in order to make it easier for the child to speak (and to want to speak) the minority language, we should create as many contexts in the minority language as possible. These include listening to music, watching shows, reading, interacting with other speakers of the minority language, especially children, traveling to the country where this language is spoken as a majority language, and enrolling them in Saturday school or any kind of formal instruction. According to Marley (2011), computer-mediated communication (CMC) is becoming a valuable source of input for minority-language learners. She found that while the young adults in her study saw speaking the minority language at home as a chore, speaking Arabic to cousins in Morocco was seen as fun.

Tip for parents: Be intentional about exposing your child as much as possible to the minority language, be it through media, personal interactions in the U.S. and country of origin, or other contexts that are applicable to your family.

Quality of contexts

Regarding the contexts, there are three important things to keep in mind. First, parents should make an effort to provide a **variety** of contexts in the minority language in order to make it more real to the child. It is unreasonable to expect a child to function well in a language if s/he does not experience "life" in this language. The variety of contexts will result in more time spent in the minority language, and it encourages the child to develop different idiolects in the language.

Second, at least some of these contexts should be 100% minority language, where the child has no option whatsoever but to function like a monolingual child of that language. This will allow the child to think in the minority language, explore the language to its fullness, and develop an identity in the language. This is sometimes hard to do in the U.S. because English, like an octopus, has a way of easily extending its tentacles into every area of daily life. But with a little effort, it is possible. An ideal context for monolingual-like functioning, of course, is for the child to spend time with native speakers of the minority language. Place and Hoff (2011) note exactly this, stressing the importance of native-speaker input and finding further that it matters that children have exposure to

conversational partners both exclusively in the minority language and from a variety of sources.

Third, parents should make these minority-language contexts more **attractive** than the alternative in the majority language. If the child has the option of watching cartoons, s/he can choose between five minutes in English and ten minutes in the minority language. The English-speaking parent can read one book in English or the minority-language parent can read two books to the child in the minority language. If Saturday school is available, the parents could get the child ice cream or a reward after school is over. They should be looking forward to this event and not regret not being able to sleep in, go to that birthday party that they are missing, etc. Positive reinforcement can have great effects on the child's attitude toward the language.

Tip for parents: Be intentional and thoughtful about the opportunities your child has to experience the minority language. Since every family's situation is different, every family's plan to bilingualism will look different.

Quantity of exposure: the math behind it

What is possible for one family is not for another. It is certainly great if the child can play with other minority-language-speaking children. Regular visits to the target country have a great effect on the child's minority-language development. Formal instruction has been found to greatly increase literacy in the child. What is one to do if these options are not available? While some of these factors have a greater effect on the child's L2 acquisition (e.g., a one-month visit to the target language country is far better than watching cartoons in the L2), parents can piece together the tools they do have available and make sure that they make the most out of every opportunity. It is recommended that the child spend roughly 30% of the time in the minority language. For one family, this minimum may be fulfilled by extended visits of grandparents from the target country. For others, it may mean watching daily 30 minutes of cartoons in the L2, speaking with the minority-language parent for two hours a day, vising family once a year, and occasional playdates with other children who speak the minority language. While the 30% (or twenty-five hours per week) is not set in stone, having flexibility and being aware that regular exposure is important makes the idea that one can succeed less daunting, even without significant time spent in the target-language country or regular attendance at a Saturday school. Every family can personalize its bilingualism plan.

Tip for parents: Without stressing out to keep track down to the minute, it is recommended that parents create opportunities for the children to be exposed to the minority language as much as possible and maintain an average of twenty-five hours per week in the minority language.

Siblings

While reading literature on bilingualism (for the present work) and reflecting upon my family's linguistic situation I⁴ was noticing with a growing sense of helplessness that my three children (ages 2, 4, and 6) had a preference to speak English amongst themselves. Realizing that they are the other main source of Hungarian to each other. I decided to try to tap into that resource. Research has found that the medium of instruction at school and the presence of siblings are particularly influential over the children's choice of the majority language (Yamamoto, 2001). Other studies note that a big shift occurs when a younger sibling is born or when bilingual children start to attend mainstream school (Shin, 2005). Yes, the literature suggests that you cannot force a child to speak a certain language and that it is common for siblings to speak the majority language to each other, but I decided to try to make speaking Hungarian more attractive to them. This approach is in line with what Obied (2009) found in her study on Portuguese-English bilinguals that "shared sibling support" does not happen automatically but needs to be encouraged and supported. At the beginning of the summer (when they were spending more time with me anyway, and less time with English-speaking children), I proposed to my children that if for a week they speak only Hungarian to each other, they will get ice cream. They were certainly excited about the reward, but they slipped back into English pretty quickly. Rather than taking away their ice cream, I told them that they can "buy" it back by doing some chores in the house. And they happily did. But they also increased the amount they spoke Hungarian, so as not to constantly remain in ice cream debt. The ice

⁴ I grew up in a (Hungarian-Romanian) bilingual household in Transylvania, Romania. I have always spoken Hungarian to my mother and sister and Romanian to my father. I have been living in the United States for nearly 15 years (since the year 2000) and my husband is American. He learned and speaks fluent Romanian and is learning (not actively) Hungarian with the children. The children and I always speak Hungarian to each other, and my husband speaks mostly English to them. His Hungarian is good enough, and the children are at a point where they accept Hungarian from him, so that he occasionally says short phrases in Hungarian to them.

cream at the end of the week was a sweet linguistic victory. The next week, the "buy-back" came in the form of eating a new vegetable and the reward was a three-dollar toy. While there are days when I hardly have to remind them at all to speak Hungarian, even the days on which my children speak more English to each other, the amount of English is significantly smaller than it was before we started our experiment.

During this shift in linguistic dynamics between the children, something else changed. Before the summer, I remember asking my oldest two children in the car on our way to preschool whether they ever speak Hungarian when they see each other on the playground. They said no, because other children would not understand. After the summer break, I took my two oldest to the birthday party of a little girl in my daughter's first-grade class. I was pleasantly surprised to notice that my children spoke Hungarian to each other the entire time, not self-conscious about the fact that those around them could not understand. The main reason for this major shift was almost certainly the comfort level they had developed over the summer speaking to each other in Hungarian. Indeed, this is the only factor that changed: they were not necessarily more competent than back in the spring, and—just like back at the playground—nobody around them at this birthday party spoke Hungarian either.

Tip for parents: Be creative in your methods of linguistic parenting and do not be afraid to be bold.

Proficiency

The next question that I would like to address is that of proficiency. What exactly can we expect from bilingual children in terms of their proficiency in the minority language?

In the field of foreign language teaching, in recent years, our profession has dealt with the questions of "what is a native speaker?" and "who owns a language?" If we look at English, we see that more people speak English as a second and foreign language than as a native language.

Kachru's Three Circles of English

Outer circle Inner circle eg USA, UK eg India, Nigeria eg China, Russia, Brazil

Fig. 1-1 English in the World

At least currently, English has a completely different status in the world than other foreign languages. But the question of "what is a native speaker?" has come up in non-English languages as well. Claire Kramsch (1997) has done a lot of work in this area by reviewing the constructs of "native speaker," "heritage speaker," and "bilingual speaker" and cautions that it is not always realistic and important to strive for native-like or nearnative proficiency. Kramsch finds the entire construct of near-native proficiency imprecise. We need to take these considerations into account when we ask ourselves what our reasonable expectations can be and how we can best achieve the highest level of proficiency or the level of bilingualism, biliteracy, and biculturalism that works best for each family. This means that, not only is the path towards proficiency different for everybody, but maybe also every family's goal is different.

It is important to remember that, even if the minority language is maintained, it is reasonable to expect differences between the variety spoken by the bilingual children as an L2 and the variety spoken by monolingual children in the minority language country of origin.

Conclusion

The situation in the U.S. shares many similarities with that in other areas in the world (immigrants wanting to fit in, children refusing to speak the minority language, parents not knowing how to overcome hurdles, etc.), but it is also unique in some ways (e.g., it only has two neighbors, one of them being a mainly English-speaking country, English is a global

language carrying high linguistic status, and the U.S is a very large country with immigrants from many corners of the world). I believe that by better informing parents and by replacing the compensatory approach with the enrichment model, many more U.S. parents can expect to raise bilingual children.

Is it worth it? Emphatic yes! As professors, we often see heritage students at the university who are learning their parents' native language as a foreign language. And they struggle and are sad about the lost opportunity of having learned it as children. Remember Caldas' children who, as adults, embraced their bilingualism and biculturalism. For the ties to heritage, cultural wealth, intellectual resources, and family bond it fosters, working with children to maintain a minority language is indeed worth the effort.

But is it worth it at any cost? No. Parents should stay informed and be sensitive to their children's emotional state. When parents come to the point of having to choose between communicating with their child and insisting on being addressed in a language the child does not want to speak, keeping the lines of communication between parent and child is more important. Many of the points I raised in this chapter are to increase parents' awareness of how to foster the minority language at an early age and, thus, hopefully to avoid getting to such a tough crossroad.

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