

Raising Trilingual Children in a Monolingual Society: Joys and Challenges from the Trenches

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Multilingual families face a language management dilemma when attempting to cultivate and support trilingualism in monolingual societies. The maintenance and development of heritage languages (HLs) for trilingual children is daunting compared to bilingual families. When a child simultaneously acquires two HLs that are minoritized in addition to a community language, there is an inherent competition between the HLs and the community language as well as between the two HLs. This can easily lead to situations where parents are tempted, over time, to give up on one or both of HLs in favor of promoting the community language. However, this compromise does not have to happen. There are ways to prevent and overcome language maintenance challenges and raise trilingual children in monolingual societies. We, scholars and mothers of trilingual children, are here to share our stories.

We, as Mothers and Scholars

Mihaela and Jayoung are two scholars conducting educational research in academia. We also document the joys and challenges of raising our children as trilinguals in a monolingual society as mothers and scholars. We believe our insights are worth sharing with other multilingual families that may be going through similar experiences. We hope that our stories will inspire others to continue on the multilingual path for their children regardless of which environment they are currently in.

We represent two multilingual families located in the southeast region of the United States of America (USA). We first met in 2019 at a conference. Shortly after that, we began collaborating professionally and, at the same time, having conversations on the everyday joys and challenges of cultivating and maintaining multiple languages and cultures in our respective families.

Mihaela is Romanian and her partner is Turkish. They have been living in the USA for almost six years. Romanian and Turkish, two HLs, along with English, are spoken daily in the household. Mihaela's child is a trilingual six-year-old girl who attends an English-only school. Her daughter can speak all three languages proficiently, with Turkish currently being the weakest.

Jayoung, from South Korea, and her partner, from Iran, have been living in the USA for 21 years. With their nine-year-old boy and a seven-year-old girl who also attend an English-only school, Jayoung's family uses two HLs, Korean and Farsi, as well as English daily. Her children can speak, read, and write in all three languages with varying proficiency levels, but Farsi is currently the weakest.

As mothers determined to raise trilingual children and as scholars of language and literacy education, we operate every day under various and intersected identities: we are trilinguals ourselves (although we initially grew up speaking only one language), educators, transnationals, and immigrants. This multitude of distinctive identifications comes with previous and ongoing life experiences, which in turn influences our everyday practices and perceptions of what it means to raise trilingual children in the USA. Given that English is the majority language in our context, maintaining two other HLs with minimal formal support does become a daily goal and struggle in each of our families.

In our roles as parents, functioning in the complex linguistic context of family trilingualism, we are constantly undergoing challenges that shift as our children grow.

Joys and Challenges of Raising Our Children as Trilinguals

Next, we are sharing some of the challenges we are facing in our determination to raise trilingual children as well as the silver linings and the joys of having multilingual families, which oftentimes overcome the struggles. We do this hoping that other parents and researchers will read our accounts and find inspiration, strength, and perseverance to continue their work with multilingual children.

1. Children's Language Mixing Practices

Joys

Over the years, both of us have witnessed our children voluntarily engaging in language brokering (i.e., children translate for other family members or individuals) across three languages, which is a common practice in multilingual families. For example, Mihaela's daughter voluntarily offered to mediate some conversations between her Turkish father and her monolingual Romanian grandmother to help them communicate faster and more effectively. In addition, a common and daily practice she engages in is asking for equivalent words in any of the three languages she is exposed to.

In Jayoung's case, her children's translanguaging (i.e., linguistic acts performed by multilinguals accessing all linguistic repertoires to maximize communicative potential) is one of the great joys to see unfolding every day. The most rewarding part is that translanguaging does not occur only in one direction. As Jayoung's children are becoming more adept in operating with the three languages they are exposed to daily, they often translanguage a less dominant HL to a more dominant HL or two HLs into English. For example, her children often report to her that they use Farsi or Korean words in their conversations with their peers who use only English. She also observed her children inserting Farsi or Korean words or phrases into their English sentences.

Challenges

We discovered at an early age for our children that maintaining and developing HLs in a monolingual society like the USA requires perseverance, consistency, and purposeful language planning.

Despite the joys around children's translanguaging, the flexible language mixing practice continues to be a threat to preserving and developing our children's less dominant languages. In Mihaela's family, her daughter would mainly translanguange English into her HLs. For example, when conversing with her father about her day at school, she would regularly start the conversation in Turkish. Later, she would include English terms she learned at school without trying to explain them by using the Turkish vocabulary she already has. Mihaela's daughter stated many times that English is easier for her to use and find expression in.

Consequently, there is a constant subconscious monitoring, conscious monitoring, and "policing" of children's language behavior that comes mainly from their mothers. Thus, as parents determined to raise trilingual children, we are constantly measuring and monitoring how much and when to intervene. It has almost become an automatic reflex for us to encourage and find opportunities for our children to have conversations in HLs when we detect that there is too much use of English. Obviously, this is not an easy task, and it takes patience, perseverance, and constant readjustment.

In addition, one of the main challenges we identified in our respective families is the unequal exposure to HLs compared to English, the community language. As parents, we must continuously provide opportunities for our children to use their HLs and motivate them to operate with these languages as much as possible. During preschool years, we focused on our children developing oral language skills (e.g., listening and speaking) in the HLs. As they entered school age, we gradually introduced literacy (e.g., reading and writing) in all the scripts. In Jayoung's case, she did so with the help from the community-based HL schools. Leading her children from being orally proficient to becoming literate in all the languages has been essential for them to continue improving their language and literacy skills. As one can imagine, we need time and commitment to fulfill our quest for children's language and literacy skills in three languages. Of course, we also need resources to teach literacy, and these are not easy to find when you live so far away from your home country and when schools teach only in the community language. However, the various resources we have utilized from the Web would be helpful to other parents and educators interested in promoting multilingualism and multilingual literacies. Please see the links below.

2. Children's Trilingual and Multicultural Identity

Joys

One of the greatest silver linings of exposing children to three languages at the same time is their well-developed trilingual and multicultural identity. Children's use of all three languages at home with family members leads to developing strong ties to their linguistic identities and cultures. For example, around the age of five, Mihaela's daughter started to associate each language she spoke with the respective country's flag. She started drawing the representation of the individual flags whenever she wanted to illustrate that a particular character in her drawings was speaking either Romanian, Turkish, or English. Jayoung's children often exchanged written messages or notes in Korean with each other. In addition, her son expressed a strong multilingual and multicultural identity through his drawings and writings around flags and airplanes. He also signs his name in three scripts in his artifacts completed at home and in his school, and the conversations he had with family members around ages four to six revealed his desire to marry someone who could speak all three languages like him. This early frame of mind speaks volumes about his developing multilingual and multicultural identity. More detailed information about Jayoung's children's multilingual repertoires can be found in her publications below.

Challenges

Children's identities come from their families' daily language interactions. However, maintaining trilingualism may create issues related to family conflict, lack of consistency, and commitment. Raising multilingual children requires perseverance and determination from parents that, in time, may fade, leading to conflicts between a more determined parent and their less committed partner. For example, using the one parent, one language (OPOL) policy may isolate some family members (e.g., one of the caregivers that do not speak one of the HLs). The frustration of not seeing results as fast as parents initially envisioned can also be discouraging and may contribute to parents' lack of motivation to keep promoting multiple languages. In addition, although the children are aware of their backgrounds and express their identities in familiar contexts, such as at home or within the immediate family, we did not observe them expressing their trilingual and multicultural identity outside of the home as much as we would like to as a trilingual family. We find this aspect disheartening. At the same time, we do not wish to force onto our children the identity we want as opposed to what they want. We want them to feel free to explore all options of their identity. However, we are determined to instill in our children a sense of pride and joy in sharing the essential parts of who they are with people outside their families.

Moreover, the children's full trilingual and multicultural identities are challenged or not acknowledged by others. That is, in many instances, children's trilingualism is mistakenly diluted to bilingualism by the public. For example, Mihaela's daughter's Turkish surname often conceals her Romanian identity unless one of the parents mentions the girl's traditional Romanian name. For Jayoung, their Korean linguistic identity is highlighted while their Farsi identity becomes hidden because, as a mother, she is mainly responsible for the school and social activities of the children.

Food for Thought Before Making the Decision to Raise Multilingual Children

Considering these challenges, three principles should guide caregivers when deciding to raise their children multilingual:

(1) Set your family's priority on children's language and literacy development in languages other than or alongside the community language. Plan how each language will be supported (e.g., through bilingual schools, community language schools, caregivers' OPOL policy, trips, extended family, etc.). Have open and frequent conversations about family language policy with family members, including partners and children, and plan and adjust short-term and long-term goals together. Also, late is better than never. For whatever reasons, if multilingualism was not your family's priority from your child's birth, do not despair and do not give up. Start now by gathering and assessing resources around you.

(2) Normalize a multilingual way of living and multilingualism for your children from the beginning and at every opportunity you have. Create a multilingual community or social circle for them no matter where you live. Children want to fit in and tend not to like to stick out in the crowd. Even if you cannot locate the same language groups, find multilingual communities around you. Explicitly talk to your children about how other children around them also speak languages other than the community language. To the children's eyes, all other children speak only the community's language. Also, share your interest and curiosity about other languages with your child if you can.

(3) Remember that you need perseverance and consistency once you decide to take the multilingual childrearing journey. Do not take it for granted that children will lose one of the HLLs along the way and that they will be the speakers of only the community language. Parenting is hard, but multilingual parenting is much more challenging. Be reminded of joys and continue pushing on whenever you feel like giving up because the gift of multiple languages is the legacy you leave to your children.

Concluding Thoughts

With increasing numbers of multilingual people, more children are born into families where two or more languages are spoken. However, speaking multiple languages does not come without effort. It is often mistakenly assumed that parents with different native languages will naturally raise multilingual children (Piller, 2002), but childrearing is emotionally and physically exhausting (Okita, 2002), requiring patience, consistency, and perseverance from parents with a minority language (Wang, 2008). There is no guarantee that children will become active users of minority languages when the larger social and educational institutions do not provide multilingual education. However, there is hope if parents are determined to swim against the stream and set their priorities clear from the beginning of their children's lives.

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Recommended Readings and Resources

<https://www.plantinglanguages.com>

<https://www.bilingual-picturebooks.org/en/books>

<http://mustardseedbooks.org>

<https://www.uniteforliteracy.com/>

<https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/metrocenter/language-rbern/resources/bilingual-glossaries-and-cognates>

<https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/metrocenter/language-rbern/bilingual-study-notes>

<https://www.scribjab.com/en/index.html>



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