

Young children in early childhood education and care and their path to Harmonious Bilingualism

A series by HaBilNet, the Harmonious Bilingualism Network

This series considers research results about young children's bilingual language development and discusses how these results can be applied in early childhood education and care so that all children may benefit from harmonious bilingual development.

Articles in the series are adaptations of texts originally published in German in [Das Kita-Handbuch](#) (online, OA), Martin R. Textor & Antje Bostelmann (eds.), over the course of 2021.

Many of the ideas in the article below were previously expressed in several talks and workshops Annick De Houwer gave throughout Europe as of 2013 that laid the basis for a [German article](#) published in the Kita-Handbuch with Mareen Pascall as co-author, thoroughly adapted and expanded upon here.

The Need for a Language-Considerate Approach in Early Childhood Education

Annick De Houwer

Introduction

More and more groups in early childhood educational institutions consist of children from very diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Many children come to day care or preschool knowing just another language than the institutional language. Even more children know both the institutional language and an additional one. Many children also know just the institutional language. All these children need an equitable chance to learn. For this to be possible, they need to feel comfortable and secure.

You can find some number estimates of the incidence of child bilingualism on pages 4-5 of Annick De Houwer's 2021 book on [Bilingual Development in Childhood](#).

In most cases, children's linguistically diverse backgrounds are ignored in early childhood education, that is, in day care and preschools (ECE). Instead, the focus is usually only on the language used in the local education system (henceforth: school language, even though day care is not usually part of the formal school system; in some cases there may be more than one school language). As explained below, this exclusive attention to the school language does not serve children well and does not contribute to their well-being or solid social integration. The question is how we can

ensure that all children feel comfortable and safe in ECE. An educational approach that actively considers all children's languages is an indispensable tool to help reach this goal. This article outlines some concrete steps that can be taken to realize such a Language-Considerate Approach. Important to mention right from the start is that a Language-Considerate Approach can be realized even if educational staff only speaks the school language. Let's first examine what children may experience upon entry in ECE.

Language Related Experiences in ECE May Not Be Positive

Children are quite capable of learning two or more languages very well. Contrary to some prevailing myths, a bilingual environment is not a threat to children. However, children need time to learn a language well. How quickly and how well bilingual children learn their languages depend on many factors, including how language is approached in ECE and what attitudes educators have toward linguistic diversity. After all, day care or preschool are the first societal contexts in which children from diverse backgrounds find themselves outside the familiar home bubble, and this at a time of their life that is quite fundamental for their later years. Early years care and teaching staff therefore bears a great social responsibility (which, however, often is unfortunately insufficiently recognized or remunerated by society as a whole). How carers and teachers approach children's linguistic backgrounds is of crucial importance. Do they see children's linguistic diversity as a resource or as a problem? Do they even know about children's linguistic backgrounds?

How ECE staff approaches children's linguistic background can have far-reaching consequences for children's well-being. Studies of children who do not hear or use the school language at home have shown what happens when children's various home languages are not given any attention in ECE. Examples from different countries show how devastating this lack of attention can be. For instance, Dahoun (1995) in Algeria and France and Manigand (1999) in France explain how children who come to preschool not understanding the school language and whose home languages are not given any attention retreat into a depressed silence that can last for years. Drury (2007) and Thiersch (2007) in the United Kingdom and Germany, respectively, have shown the same (see Example 1 and 2 in the following boxes for details).

Example 1: a self-reported case study (Dahoun 1995)

- At age 3, Zerdalia starts attending a French-speaking preschool in Algiers. She speaks Arabic at home. On her first day at preschool, Zerdalia is shocked to hear her teacher mispronounce her name, and at the fact that she cannot understand anything.
- After a year of listening silently and trying to decipher what is going on, Zerdalia notices that some children receive candy after they say something. She also wants candy, and thinks she has figured out something to say that the teacher will like. Excitedly, she gets up and says something but only gets a cold stare back, pointing at her seat, and no candy.

Example 2: the case of Smita (Drury 2007)

- Smita lives in England and hears Bengali at home. At the age of three, she can express herself very well in Bengali. She is a happy child who gets along well with others.
- At the age of three and a half, Smita enters a preschool where only English is spoken and where other languages are entirely ignored. Smita does not understand any English. She cries every day and does not want to go to school. She seems depressed at home, but her parents want her to stay at school, where they are sure she will learn English, which they find very important.
- At school, Smita doesn't speak at all, even by the time she is four and a half. By then luckily she is a bit happier again at home and progressing very well in her Bengali language development. Smita tells her parents that she doesn't understand anything that is said in day care. She simply imitates what the other children do. She has no friends at school.
- When Smita is five, her teacher tells her parents that Smita will not be able to enroll in primary school, because, she says, Smita "does not speak". The teacher knows nothing about Smita's abilities in Bengali and has never asked.

Children like Zerdalia and Smita first primarily hear a family language other than the school language at home and do not have a chance to begin learning the school language until they start attending ECE. This is called Early Second Language Acquisition (ESLA). It takes some time before ESLA children begin to understand the school language. Some ESLA children start to speak it a bit already after a few months, but many take much longer. Although this "silent period" is often considered "normal" for ESLA children, the examples from Zerdalia and Smita show that it can be quite traumatic, with some 5-year-olds having spent half their lives in depressed silence at preschool. It is clear that such prolonged periods of silence must be avoided. Below I discuss ways to do so.

Children not understanding the school language is not the only issue. Children are also not understood when they speak, which means their most basic needs (expressing that they have to use the restroom, for instance, or that they feel ill) are not acted on. Unsurprisingly, this does not make children feel accepted and welcomed. Rather, children feel left out. Feeling left out does not contribute to socio-emotional well-being. Yet, such well-being is of fundamental importance to learning, especially in early childhood. *Children can only develop their social and communicative skills, develop as a person, and actively engage in learning when they feel well cared for and accepted in ECE.* A lack of well-being will also affect the learning of the new language used in ECE, with children withdrawing into themselves and avoiding communication, which makes it unlikely they will soon learn the school language. Additionally, if children feel no recognition or respect for their home language(s), they may not develop any motivation for learning the school language.

Most young bilingual children, though, do not grow up in an ESLA context, with a first and a second language, but hear two first languages at home right from the start. These children grow up in a Bilingual First Language Acquisition (BFLA) setting. The family languages that BFLA children hear from birth typically consist of the school language and another language. By the time they enter ECE they understand the school language and are usually able to speak it as well. Thus, they can

communicate in the school language from the very beginning and do not have the comprehension issues ESLA peers have. You might expect there not be any threats to BFLA children's well-being in ECE, because, after all, they are able to use one of their languages there, right? The next section explains how even for BFLA children the ignoring of one of their languages may become a problem.

The Importance of All Family Languages

Language is a highly symbolic means of communication that has a lot of emotional connotations. Language is related to cultural and personal identity. It is never neutral.

By keeping family languages that are not spoken at school invisible and inaudible, they are implicitly given less value than the school language. For BFLA children, part of their identity is thus ignored – it seems as if part of them does not exist. For ESLA children who do not yet know the school language, their entire identity is erased. While some children cope well with the fact that their non-school language is limited to the private family sphere, others react with a loss of self-esteem. A feeling might arise which can be described like this:

If you ignore my language, you ignore me as a person. If you reject my language, you reject me.

As mentioned earlier, BFLA children who hear a school language as one of the two or more languages spoken at home have learned to understand the school language. BFLA children have so far not been reported to experience difficulties with the school language or to retreat from using the school language. Instead, they often start refusing to use any non-school language at home, leading to the dramatic evidence that about one in four children raised with two languages at home only speak the school language*. One main reason for children rejecting non-school languages may be the fact that at (pre-)school these languages are often entirely ignored, thus signaling to children that these languages are of no value, and that speaking them is equally of no value. Thus, children do not wish to be identified with these languages, and likely hope to increase their own value by not speaking them.

*[Here](#) is the study by A. De Houwer showing massive inter-generational language loss worldwide.

The fact that children no longer speak a language they hear at home can have serious negative consequences for family life. The impact of children refusing to use a language that at least one parent speaks with them is immediate on parents, who feel rejected by their children, ashamed that their children can no longer communicate with grandparents in a parent's country of origin, worried, and depressed. Parent-child communication may become difficult and emotionally distant because parents and children no longer speak the same language. The continued development of a positive emotional relationship between children and parents is jeopardized. As children grow older, deep conversations become more difficult or impossible if parents and children each communicate in a different language. The fact that children no longer speak the non-school language(s) thus detracts from bilingual families' and children's well-being.

These facts show that what happens in ECE can have quite negative effects on children with a

language at home that is not the school language. These negative effects that are the result of children feeling excluded should be avoided. Fortunately, there are some relatively simple and inexpensive ways in which ALL children in ECE can feel included from the very start, regardless of their language background. Using these ways are part of what I call a Language-Considerate Approach in ECE.

How to Realize a Language-Considerate Approach in Early Childhood Education

The key to helping children from diverse linguistic backgrounds feel included in ECE from the very start is to *actively* give attention to all children's languages and show them *respect*. This stance shows that children's languages are considered, in the literal sense of being taken into consideration. It also shows a friendliness and openness that are associated with the term "considerate". Hence the approach proposed here is termed a Language-Considerate Approach. Within such an approach, all educators explicitly and respectfully acknowledge that children may bring a language other than the school language from home.

A Language-Considerate Approach is integrated in everyday language use in the day care center or preschool and does not constitute a special, separate, and hard to learn teaching program. It can immediately be implemented, without any further training (see Tips Box 1). However, the feasibility of a Language-Considerate Approach crucially depends on educators' willingness to have an open attitude towards all the languages children bring to ECE and to the cultures associated with them. This does not mean that educators must know these languages. It also does not mean that different languages are offered in ECE. Rather, within a Language-Considerate Approach educators' open attitude translates into practices that actively value all the children's family languages. Through those practices, children will feel appreciated and welcomed, rather than rejected.

The practices in Tips Box 1 will make children feel welcomed and they won't have the experience that their languages are ignored. At the same time, these practices will increase ALL children's language awareness. Language awareness is important for many academic skills, first and foremost literacy development. Check out [this blog article](#) how you can support literacy in ECE within a Language-Considerate Approach.

Tips Box 1

Here is a selective list of what you as an ECE staff member can do to actively show an interest in and respect for all the languages and dialects that children bring to ECE:

- Ask all parents whether they speak another language at home than the school language (or a dialect).
- This will give you some clue as to children's language backgrounds. Please do not ask parents to name the language(s) they speak at home - this could be a very delicate question (in some regions of the world speaking a particular language can get you killed). If parents spontaneously identify their home language(s), so much the better. This knowledge may come in handy later on.

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Tips Box 1 – *continued*

- Try to pronounce children's names correctly
- You may need parents' help here: you can ask them how their child's name is pronounced, and you can record it on your phone, and listen to it at home and try to repeat it. When you then try to say it in front of the parents and child, ask the parents whether you've got it right. When you sense parents are not completely enthusiastic, make a new recording and try again, until you get it right. Names are an important part of children's identity. Do not give them another name by mispronouncing it.
- Try to learn to say "hallo", "thanks", "bye", "sorry" in all the languages (and dialects!) represented in the group and try to teach ALL the children ALL these versions.
- Once again, record parents' renditions of these words and practice! (No need to know the names of any languages or dialects - just make sure you combine the right words with the right child.)
- Do the same for color names and numbers 1-5 and ask children to translate between the school language and any other language and dialect present in the group (both ways!).
- Tell children that it is really great that they know Turkish, Portuguese, Russian or any other language or dialect, including the school language!
- *You saying this will communicate to children that all languages are equally important.*
- Tell children you are sorry you cannot speak like their parents
- Make sure to cover ALL the languages and dialects that your particular group of children is bringing to the classroom

Now you will say, well, but how can children understand me if they don't know the school language? True, especially at the very beginning, when children first arrive not understanding the school language, things are very tough, both for the children and for the staff. Tips Box 2 mentions some things you could try.

Tips Box 2

Here is a selective list of what you as ECE staff can do to help children who do not understand the school language when they first come to day care or preschool. You could...

- try to use body language and mimicry to get into contact with the young children who do not yet understand the school language
- try to learn to understand and say a few key words and phrases in each of the children's languages and dialects (e.g., about bathroom needs, pain, feeling unwell). You can do this by asking parents how you say such-and-such in their language or dialect
- make sure to smile a lot and spend time with children by themselves, in one-on-one interactions, where you can go through simple picture books, name the pictures in the school language, and ask children what they call the objects and actions there (you will have to ask with lots of clear non-verbal communication through pointing)
- use older bilingual children to help out with communication with new children, especially when it seems to matter a lot and a new child is upset
- use a translation app on your phone that might help you understand the new children, and might help the new children understand you

As time goes on you will get an idea of the main languages "your" children bring to the classroom. But of course, one of the main goals of ECE is to help children develop (better) skills in the school language, regardless of what their level of skill is upon arrival. The next box has a few tips for how you can support the development of the school language for ALL children.

Tips Box 3

Here is a selective list of what you as ECE staff can do to support the development of the school language for ALL children. You could...

- speak clearly and distinctly
- use context and pictures appropriately to teach children new words and phrases
- answer children's questions
- respond supportively to what a child says, no matter in which language
- give children the time they need to form a sentence on their own, rather than speaking "for" children, that is, in their place. Do not hurry them.
- make sure to have one-on-one interactions for at least 5 minutes with each child each day.

The tips in Tips Box 3 are language neutral, and work for ALL languages. The tips in Tips Box 4 will help particularly for those children who do not yet speak the school language well.

Tips Box 4

Here is what you can do to help staff make bridges between children's home language(s) and the school language:

- based on information from parents, start building up a more general multilingual word archive at your institution that is easily accessible to all the staff. The basic words and phrases will help staff with yet other new children, but there is more...:
- talk about this archive. This gives the languages and dialects in there more value. Treating the parents as experts gives THEM more value
- by relying on the archive you can teach children new words in the school language that they already know in their other language.

Finally, and quite fundamentally, language use requires a community. Try to build a community in your institution by nurturing good contacts with all parents beyond using them as resource for words and phrases

...so you can support the parents
...and the parents you!

Tips Box 5

Here are some community building ideas that fit a Language-Considerate Approach and that will benefit ALL children. You could...

- present your institution as an open institution that welcomes parents (preferably at regular, pre-set times, though)
- ask parents to help you in decorating your classrooms and corridors with objects that are meaningful in their cultures
- ask parents to bring CDs or share playlists with children's music that is connected to their regions of origin
- invite (grand)parents to come and spend a few hours in the classroom to sing in their languages or read books in their languages
- organize intercultural activities with help from parents and children
- organize intercultural theme weeks
- organize informal breakfasts for everybody with contributions from parents and staff

Learn about an project in the Netherlands and Germany that has successfully implemented community building in ECE [here](#). Parents who participated in this "Backpack"-project showed an increased interest in the preschool, and home interaction between parents and children was much improved.

Luckily, more and more schools are acknowledging the importance of respectful approaches to all children's languages. Particularly noteworthy is the [Language Friendly School](#) initiative.

Conclusion

A respectful and appreciative attitude of educators towards language diversity within a Language-Considerate Approach allows children to learn that all languages are of equal value and that all children are quite capable of learning several languages. The openness in early education that children will feel towards their family languages is bound to foster an openness on the part of children towards the school language and thus facilitate its learning. If the day care center or preschool actively welcomes parents of all backgrounds and recognizes them as experts in their languages rather than disappointing speakers of the school language parents will start to feel connected with the educational institution and take a greater interest in it. This can lay the foundation for a continued parental interest in children's school experience, which is so important for children's well-being and academic advancement.

Early education which is open to bilingualism does not cost much money in and of itself. Rather, it requires a respectful and positive attitude towards all the languages and dialects that children bring to the day care center or preschool. Such an actively respectful attitude on the part of early education staff will contribute to bilingual children's well-being and promote all children's language awareness.

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