



## Answers to the three most common parental questions on raising bilingual children: HaBilNet consultation FAQs with Janice Nakamura & Annick De Houwer

*By Nina Schwöbel, Annick De Houwer & Janice Nakamura*

The HaBilNet website offers content for researchers, practitioners, parents and anyone interested in child-rearing that supports Harmonious Bilingualism. In order to provide scientifically based advice to families, HaBilNet also offers a consultation service free of charge.

Many families have clear ideas of what they want when it comes to their children's language skills. However, it often comes as a surprise to parents how bumpy the road gets towards reaching the language goals they have set for their family. How people feel about the languages they hear and speak, and why, are important factors when it comes to creating an environment that works well for all family members. A HaBilNet [consultation](#) allows parents or other family members to discuss specific questions and/or share their current situation in order to analyze whether they are on the right track. Together with the consultant they can find a way to become more satisfied with how they manage languages within their family.

After more than 150 consultations with parents, we would like to share the three most frequently asked questions and outline the advice that HaBilNet consultants Janice Nakamura and Annick De Houwer have given in response to them. We hope this can help our readers. But if you need more detailed answers or if you have additional questions, please do not hesitate to [request a consultation](#).

### **Question No. 1:**

#### **How can I support my language if it is not my child's school language?**

Input quality and quantity play an important role in supporting children's language development. If you would like your child to learn to speak your language, you will have to take the time to speak with

them as much as possible. The following is a list of activities and strategies that may help you find a routine that fits your family situation.

You could...

- ...talk to your child as much as possible to maximize the input in the given language.
- ...spend as much time as possible with your child on a one-on-one basis (e.g., choose a hobby you enjoy together).
- ...find or start a playgroup with parents who speak your language.
- ...find babysitters who can speak your language to your child.
- ...host students or guests who speak your language well and are willing to speak it around your child (maybe you can find some from your home country?).
- ...use tactile picture books or teach songs (with accompanied movements) and nursery rhymes.
- ...regularly read to and with your child in your language - better still, develop a daily habit of reading together. Start with very short picture books when your baby is 2 months old!
- ...once your child is of primary school age, [teach your child how to read and write](#) in your language. Having literacy skills will expand your child's knowledge of the language and allows for independent learning at older ages.
- ...recreate a bit of your 'country' or 'region' of origin in your home by practicing traditions and customs.
- ...surround your child by cultural features associated with your place of origin and your language.
- ...try to visit a region where your language is widely spoken as often as possible.
- ...show your child children's media programs in your language and watch together with your child (we do not recommend this for children younger than two or so, though: [screen viewing is not so good for young children](#)).
- ...arrange [video calls with grandparents](#) and other relatives who speak your language. They can provide additional input in your language. Some grandparents even read to their grandchildren over Zoom with the use of digital e-books!

### Rhymes

Via this [website](#) you can find some examples of rhymes in several languages. The English rhyme "[pat-a-cake](#)" is the most famous English one.

### Books

At [African Storybook](#) you can find online children's books in many different languages.

At [Bilingual Picturebooks](#) you'll find many bilingual picture books. If you feel like it, you can adjust the text as you read with your child.

**Question No. 2:**

**My child understands the language I speak to her/him, but replies in another language - how can I influence my child's language choice?**

Children will often choose to speak the language in which they can express themselves more easily. You can nudge them towards speaking your language with you through the way you respond in a conversation.

- One way of encouraging your child to speak your language when they used another one is to ask your child to confirm what (s)he said in the preferred language (scholars call this the **expressed guess** discourse strategy). So if your child said "Jyuusu hoshii" in Japanese but you are speaking English to her/him you would basically repeat what your child said in English, but through a question, in this case: "Do you want more juice?". It is not hard for your child to respond to the expressed guess strategy. After all, the required language is usually embedded in the question, but often it is enough if your child says "yes", so that doesn't really make your child speak much English (in this example). However, you've shown your child the words that perhaps (s)he lacked.
- Another conversational response that pushes your child a bit further is what is called a **minimal grasp** discourse strategy. Basically, you would just ask a clarification question. After your child's "Jyuusu hoshii" request in Japanese you would just ask: "What?". This question promotes active use of English because your child has to come up with the appropriate English response on her/his own (you can substitute any other language for English in this example, of course).
- The **request to translate** is the most explicit strategy. You prompt your child to switch to the preferred language by saying, for example, "How does Mommy say it?" (for more in-depth descriptions see the scientific texts below<sup>1</sup>).

If you regularly use a mix of these three conversational responses (called discourse strategies) from the very beginning, and if you're speaking a lot to your child (see Question 1), your child will soon learn to speak your language to you.

However, often parents pay no real attention to the language their child uses. Because parents are often bilingual they will understand their child's speech, regardless in which language.

- Parents often just respond in the language they prefer to speak to their child (in what is called a *move-on* strategy). Carrying on with the conversation without interruption signals to your child that you accept her use of the other language. This may lead to permanently 'dual-lingual' conversations where each party speaks a different language.

<sup>1</sup>Nakamura, Janice. (2018). [Parents' use of discourse strategies in dual-lingual interactions with receptive bilingual children.](#)  
De Houwer, Annick & Nakamura, Janice. (2021). [Developmental Perspectives on Parents' Use of Discourse Strategies with Bilingual Children.](#)

- Parents may even switch to the language their child is speaking (called *code-switching*). Following your child's lead gives the impression that your language does not need to be used. It also reduces the amount of input that your child hears in your language.

The *move-on* and *code-switching* conversational strategies do not promote your child's use of the preferred language. Rather, the best ways to encourage your child to use your language through conversation are to use the *expressed guess*, *minimal grasp*, and *request to translate* conversational strategies.

Finally, parents may simply translate their child's sentence or word into their own language (called the *adult repetition* strategy). This may encourage your child to repeat the words in your language, but your child may not feel compelled to repeat the sentence or word in your language. At any rate, the *adult repetition* strategy provides more vocabulary for future conversations.

In order for you to be able to use encouraging discourse strategies you have to become aware of what language your child is speaking at any given moment. Is your child speaking your language with you or another one? You will soon become more attuned to what language your child usually speaks with you, even though your child may be very young. You should start using encouraging discourse strategies from the moment your child is saying short sentences. Once you are using encouraging discourse strategies it is important to be consistent and firm. This may be a bit tough in the beginning, but once your child understands that (s)he is expected to speak the same language as you and has the words in your language that (s)he needs, (s)he will fall into the routine.

Here are some other tips to promote your child's use of your language:

- Praising your child for speaking your language may help her/him become more and more aware of his/her language choice.
- Having a hand puppet that speaks only your language and that you engage in conversation models a conversation in your language for your child to observe and learn from. It also signals that your language is fun.
- One way of helping your child to learn the words (s)he needs in all the family languages is to encourage her/him to ask questions such as "How does daddy say it?" or "What's it called in English, daddy?"

Finally, try not to become a language broker for your child when grandma or others who speak your language come to visit: allow your child the time to express herself in grandma's language, and ask grandma to encourage that, even though at first communication may be a bit difficult. And

if you establish a working routine with your first child you are laying the ground work for any children to follow! Read more about the importance of creating the need to speak a language in our blog article [This is the Secret to Success in Raising a Bilingual Child](#). Also, please take a look at two brief videos by prominent bilingualism researchers (one of them by HaBilNet Advisory Board Member [Adam Winsler](#)) emphasizing that parents who want their children to speak their language must create the need to use it. You'll find Dr. Winsler's video [here](#), and [this](#) is where you'll see and hear Dr. Simona Montanari.

### Question No. 3:

**How can I best support my child's bilingualism at different life stages, for example, as a baby, or at the time my child starts attending day care or (pre)school?**

Language plays a role very early on in life - even before babies are born. They react differently to languages [they have or have not heard during pregnancy](#). So it makes sense to start your bilingual journey early on, if you can! However, as it is a journey, routines will (need to) change as your child grows older.

#### *How to support babies:*

Specific ways of speaking to your baby (called infant-directed speech) make it easier for your baby to start latching on to language.

It is best to...

- ...speak in a higher voice when you address your baby
- ...use exaggerated facial expressions when you talk to your baby
- ...speak fairly slowly
- ...use fairly long pauses between phrases
- ...use short and simple sentences
- ...repeat parts of sentences
- ...put stress on important words
- ...articulate very clearly

Find out more through [this video](#) from minute 14 onward.

Many people speak to babies like this automatically and can do this in particular if they are speaking their own first language with them (or their two first languages); it's a difficult thing to do in a language that is really a foreign language to you.

Once your baby starts to show signs of understanding language it becomes really important to engage your child in brief "conversations", in which you do all the "real" talking, but your baby responds

through non-verbal means, such as flapping legs in excitement, smiling, waving, and so forth. You will soon learn to attune to your baby and adjust to your child's growing language development.

*When babies become toddlers, preschoolers and primary school children:*

As your baby grows older, you will use less and less of the features typical of infant-directed speech. In addition to doing what we propose in the answers under Questions 1 and 2 above, there are the following things to consider.

At some point your child may suddenly no longer speak your language with you. This often happens at children's major life transitions, that is, when they enter preschool or elementary school. We advise you to be extra vigilant at this time and to give children extra attention in your language at these junctures. That way you may be able to avoid a shift to receptive bilingualism (with your child continuing to understand your language but no longer speaking it).

It will be important to keep motivating and encouraging your child to speak your language. If you can, surround them with people who are positive about bilingualism and who praise your child for speaking two languages. This will make your child feel special and more confident. Seek out fun activities in your language. If there are families in your neighborhood who speak your language, try to connect with them.

If your child experiences positive attitudes towards all her/his languages this will greatly support a positive development of a bilingual and perhaps also bicultural identity. As your child gets older, you may want to have conversations about how languages are used within your family and why you find both languages important.

You may find that your children solely communicate with each other in the school language even though they are fluent bilingual speakers. Please don't worry - it is typical that bilinguals use their languages in different circumstances.

HaBilNet Director Annick De Houwer advises parents to take time off work in the afternoons of their children's first week at (pre)school. This will enable parents to fully engage with children after they first come back home from (pre)school. Children will be tired and their minds will be full of the school language. Best to give them the chance to talk about their day in the school language if they so wish, and to make sure they have a rest and something to drink or eat. After children have settled down, start up a conversation about their school day in your language and be ready to furnish words about school that children may not know in your language. Ask children to try and remember these words so that the next day they may talk to you about their day in your language. Make sure to be encouraging and please never rebuke children for speaking the school language to you, even if they have never done so before! Making a special effort to encourage your child to speak about the school day in your language may make all the difference for your child's continued use of your language with you.

As HaBilNet Director Annick De Houwer has repeatedly noted (for instance, in this [free article](#)), what happens at (pre)school is of crucial importance to bilingual children's continued use of the non-school language. It will greatly help if teachers have an open and respectful attitude towards your language, and if there are activities at (pre)school that actively show an interest in all the languages that children bring to the classroom. As a parent you may need to have a conversation with your child's (pre)school teacher about the importance of your language to your entire family and about ways in which the (pre)school can support all children's languages. [Here is an article](#) with ideas about how to do so that you could show the teacher.

### **In Conclusion**

To summarize, parents and other family members who have taken part in a HaBilNet consultation were especially interested in (1) how to support their children learning their (non-school) language, (2) how to make sure children reply in the same language that parents address to them, and (3) how to support children at different life stages, from birth to school. A common thread of our consultants' replies to parental questions is that it is crucial to create a positive environment for children that shows how all their languages are important.

No matter if you looked at one or all of the questions, we hope you were able to take something away from the responses and additional resources. We wish you and your family all the best on your Harmonious Bilingualism journey.

### **About the Authors**

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