

Bilingualism

What is bilingualism?

Bilingualism is when a person understands and/or uses two or more languages. A person is described as bilingual regardless of their level of ability in either language. Bilingualism is **not a disorder** and therefore is a description of the person's language ability, not a diagnostic label. Bilingualism never causes or contributes to a communication disorder.

Language labels

Mother tongue, Home language, First language and **L1** are all labels applied to the language a child hears in their home environment.

Additional language, Second language and **L2** are labels applied to the language a child hears in addition to their first language.

Routes to bilingualism

Different terms may be used to describe how a person becomes bilingual. Terms most commonly used are:

Simultaneous bilingualism

A child who has been exposed to two languages from birth or a very early age. This manner of bilingual language acquisition has been frequently studied but may not be the most common route to bilingualism.

Sequential bilingualism

A child who is exposed to an additional language after their first language. This manner of bilingual language acquisition has been less frequently studied but is thought to be the most common route to bilingualism.

Language competence

The term 'balanced bilingualism' is sometimes used to describe a person who speaks all their languages equally well. Balanced bilingualism is often held to be the ideal. However, balanced bilingualism is rare, and people with different levels of competence in each language should not be viewed negatively.

Additional language learning

Children and adults may acquire an additional language after they have acquired their first language. This language learning process is different to first language acquisition. As the person has already demonstrated that they have acquired their first language without difficulty, additional language difficulties should be regarded as educational issues rather than a primary language disorder.

The term **EAL** refers to English as an additional language. This is where a person learns English after learning their first language. This term should be avoided as the additional language may not be English. For example, in Wales, a person may learn English first at home and then acquire Welsh as an additional language.

Codeswitching

Codeswitching (also called code mixing and language mixing) is where a bilingual person uses two (or more) languages together. 'Code' is a linguistic term for a language. In **intersentential codeswitching** a bilingual person uses one language for one sentence, followed by another language for the next. In **intrasentential codeswitching** a bilingual person uses both languages within the same sentence. Codeswitching is normal and not a sign of confusion. There is evidence that children who have specific language impairment do not use codeswitching even when it is common to do so in their community.

Bilingual people with specific language impairment (SLI)

Bilingualism does not cause or contribute to SLI. However, SLI is just as likely to affect bilingual children as monolingual children. A bilingual child presenting with SLI will experience difficulties acquiring both (all) their languages. It is therefore essential for a speech and language therapist (with the assistance of an appropriately qualified co-worker, where applicable) to assess a child in the context of all the languages to which the child is exposed.

References

Baker, C., 2007. *A Parents' and Teachers' Guide to Bilingualism, 3rd Revised edition*. (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters)

Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, 2006. *Communicating Quality 3: .* (London: Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists)

Other relevant Glossary Sheets

As bilingual children and adults are just as likely to experience any of the communication difficulties as monolingual people, any of the other Afasic leaflets may be applicable.

Other organisations which can help

The Bilingual Family Newsletter

<http://www.bilingualfamilynewsletter.com>

Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists

2 White Hart Yard
London
SE1 1NX
Tel: 020 7378 1200

**Written by Dr Sean Pert and Dr Carol Stow,
Specialist Speech and Language Therapists in
bilingualism, Heywood, Middleton and Rochdale
Primary Care Trust.**

© Afasic 2007

**Afasic
1st Floor
20 Bowling Green Lane
London EC1R 0BD
Phone 020 7490 9410
Fax 020 7251 2834
Email info@afasic.org.uk
www.afasic.org.uk
Helpline 0845 3 55 55 77**



Telephone
Helplines
Association
quality and confidence for callers to helplines

Registered charity no. 1045617