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1-1-2013

Bringing up bilingual children: choices and challenges

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Abstract

Introduction: family language choices This paper explores a migrant mother's struggle to pass on her language to her children; a struggle which Li (2007) claims is shared by "souls in exile". It is one of thousands of stories in Australia which speak of the importance of passing on the gifts of bilingualism and biculturalism to children. The data on which it is based comes from the mother's journals and recorded discussions with the researchers over a period of ten years.

Keywords

up, bilingual, challenges, choices, bringing, children

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details

Ellis, L. and Bilbatua, L. (2013). Bringing up bilingual children: choices and challenges. *Voces Hispanas*, (10), 20-26.

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Introduction: family language choices

This paper explores a migrant mother's struggle to pass on her language to her children; a struggle which Li (2007) claims is shared by "*souls in exile*". It is one of thousands of stories in Australia which speak of the importance of passing on the gifts of bilingualism and biculturalism to children. The data on which it is based comes from the mother's journals and recorded discussions with the researchers over a period of ten years.

Amaya¹ is a Spanish mother who emigrated to Australia, married Jason, an Australian, and had two children. Both parents wanted their children to grow up bilingual, with proficiency in both English and Spanish, as well as wanting them to identify with both the Australian and Spanish cultures and to be able to communicate with the extended family in Spain. However the fact that the couple divorced when the children were 7 and 3 meant that responsibility for the family language plans fell entirely to Amaya.

Amaya's decision to bring the children up in Spanish was not because of her limited English proficiency, since she reports that she would have been capable of bringing them up in English. However it is easier and more natural for a parent, particularly the primary caregiver, to interact with babies and children in one's first language. Kouritzin's (2000) poignant account of her own attempt to mother in her second language, Japanese suggests that it was an uphill battle which possibly robbed her and her child of intimate mother-child experiences enacted linguistically.

Amaya's strong desire to pass her first language onto her children is one shared by many parents who have a language other than that of the dominant society, and one supported by bilingualism researchers who maintain that being bilingual is always an advantage (Baker 2011, Edwards 2003). There is plenty of evidence to suggest that bilingualism confers both cognitive and academic benefits, and that children who do not learn the language of their parents miss out (Fischman 2002). Research suggests that bilinguals are better at problem solving and do better academically than those who speak only one language (Lambert and Tucker 1972). Like many parents, Amaya and Jason opted for the 'One Parent One Language' or OPOL approach (Döpke 1992, De Houwer 2009) as the most natural and easily-maintained. This meant that Amaya only spoke Spanish to the children, while Jason spoke only English.

How Spanish was maintained in the family

Both parents knew that to make the OPOL system work, Amaya had to consciously and systematically speak Spanish to their children from birth, even though she could also speak English.

"I wanted to maintain my identity with my language and culture and make sure that my kids could relate to my mother and sisters and brother, all of them living in Spain. But mainly, I had a strong need to express my affection to them in my own language, the need to feel more 'real' and competent through my own language and also the desire to give them the wonderful gift of being bilinguals"

Examples of the early mothering language to which Amaya refers above include nursery rhymes, counting games, finger games, tongue-twisters, and the affectionate names she instinctively called the children in Spanish: “mi princesa”, “mi corazón”, [my princess, my heart] for Leticia and “mi bonito”, “mi rey”, “mi gordito [my beautiful one, my king, my little chubby one] for Javier.

Amaya also took advantage of local community resources such as Spanish classes for young children, and had many children’s videos in Spanish. Other contact with the language occurred through visits from local Spanish friends; telephone conversations with relatives in Spain; visits by Spanish relatives to Australia, and visits by Amaya and the children to Spain.

By the time of his first visit to Spain at age five, it was clear that Javier’s Spanish was developing. He had the following conversation with his grandmother (who spoke no English), and this shows that despite lexicogrammatical errors, he can communicate effectively.

Javier: Amamaⁱⁱ, ¿Tú tener mucho dinero?
[Amama, you got a lot of money?]
[Amama, have you got a lot of money?]

Amama: (Hesitantly and wanting to impress her grandson)
Sí, cariño, pero ¿por qué me lo preguntas?
[Yes darling, but why are you asking?]

Javier: ¿Tú sabes Play Station?
[Do you know Play Station]

Amama: ¿Qué es eso? ¿Un juego?
[What’s that? Is it a game]

Javier: Sí, yo quiero comprar
[Yes, I want to buy]
[Yes, I would like to buy one]

Amama: Muy bien cariño, mañana tú y yo vamos de compras
[That’s fine darling, tomorrow you and I will go shopping.]

Javier uses ‘tú tener’ and, later, ‘tú sabes’ whereas a native speaker would use ‘tienes’ and ‘conoces’. Normally the subject (here, ‘tú’) is omitted unless emphasis is required. ‘Tener’ is the infinitive form instead of the inflected ‘tienes’, and ‘sabes’ is a direct transfer from English ‘do you know’.

Leticia was linguistically very proficient on that visit, but she did not have full competence in sociocultural aspects of the language. The following excerpt shows how Leticia’s lack of familiarity with naming conventions resulted in an inadvertently humorous episode. Leticia and Amaya had been to visit Aunt Dolores who had just had an operation on her knee. The visit went very well, with the three chatting, laughing and exchanging old family stories. After the visit the following conversation ensued:

Leticia: Amá, ¿La tía Dolores sufre mucho?
[Mum, does Aunt Dolores suffer a lot?]

Amaya: No ... no sé porqué me preguntas eso ya le has visto, estaba contenta
[No ... I don't know why you ask me that, you saw her, and she was happy]

Leticia: ¿Y porqué le llaman así?
[*Still with a worried face:* why do they call her that?]

Amaya: ¿Qué quieres decir?
[What do you mean?]

Leticia: Si ... ¿por qué le llaman tía Dolores?
[Why do they call her Aunt Dolores?]

Amaya's notes recalled:

"Suddenly it clicked, and I cracked up laughing. Dolores means 'pains', or 'suffering', so "Tía Dolores" translates literally as "Aunt Pains" in English. I was so used to talking with Leticia in Spanish that I didn't realise that she was not aware of how common such female names are in Spanish."

Names such as 'Dolores' come from the different stages of suffering of the Virgin Mary: for example (La Virgen de los) Dolores, and (La Virgen de la) Inmaculada Concepción". Leticia took such names literally, while Amaya had lost the awareness of their origins.

Challenges

The OPOL approach worked well for the family, but the divorce when the children were 7 and 3 altered the family language dynamics in a number of important ways. The children began spending alternate weekends with their father in an exclusively English household, while at this stressful time Amaya found it harder to maintain her Spanish-only rule. There is little research overall on the effect of divorce on the bilingualism of children, but Cunningham-Andersson (1999:109) maintains that a divorce is unlikely to be beneficial to the children's second language development, given the reduced amount of time that single parents are generally able to spend with their children.

As time went on Amaya realised that her goal of bilingualism was harder than she had anticipated, for the children only spoke Spanish at home and only with her, and even then not all the time.

"Sometimes I have to change to English to save time and avoid frustration, such as when we are talking about their school work. Jason used to have most of the responsibility for English in the family, like monitoring homework, library books, explaining new words or expressions, writing notes for school and so on. Then suddenly I have to do that, and I suppose it means I am using less Spanish with them" (Amaya's journal)

Another way in which English began to dominate was at school where it was the only language spoken, and the effect of this became evident. Towards the end of her primary school years Leticia would ask Amaya not to speak Spanish to her in front of

her friends because she found it embarrassing. Amaya's response was:

"...don't be silly, I'm going to talk to you in my language, and you answer me in whatever language you want."

In this way Amaya showed her daughter that speaking Spanish was important to her, and that she insisted on persevering with it, while still allowing Leticia the choice of English or Spanish in her reply.

A further challenge was that Javier did not begin to talk until he was four years old. His pre-school teachers suggested that the Spanish-speaking home could be causing his language delay, which caused Amaya to worry that the original decision of raising the children bilingually had been a mistake.

Javier did finally start to talk fluently but only in English. He may have been a late developer, or the divorce when he was three may have contributed to his language delay. Leticia's Spanish was well-established by then, while Javier's was just beginning.

There were also other differences between the siblings' language development, which we consider in the next section.

Sibling differences

At fifteen and eleven years old there are noticeable differences in the children's proficiency in Spanish which may be due to birth order, (Shin 2002), key events happening at different ages, amount of input or effects of the divorce.

Leticia's first words were in English, but on the first visit to Spain, at two and a half, she produced the first sentence which included Spanish:

"Mum, I want to go to the beach para jugar con niños"
[Mum, I want to go to the beach to play with children]

After that her progress was rapid and by three years old she could effectively communicate in both languages.

Javier, in contrast, as referred to above, did not start speaking at all until he was four and although he could understand Spanish, he would only answer in English. There are several possible explanations for their differential language development. One of these is differences in the children's experiences of visiting Spain.

The family's longest visit, of three months, came when Javier was a tiny baby, but when Leticia, aged five, was at an optimum stage for language development. In addition, Leticia visited at the age of three when Javier was not yet born, so she overall had more immersion experience due to her first-born status. Another difference could stem from the amount of Spanish input each child received. When Leticia was little and the marriage was intact, Amaya spent most of the time at home interacting with Leticia in Spanish. After the divorce Amaya began working more hours and sent Javier to pre-school, exposing him to more English. This meant

that Amaya spent less time with Javier than with Leticia at the same age, and therefore that he had less Spanish interaction with his mother. At the same time, although both Javier and Leticia began to spend some of the time at their English-speaking father's house, the effect of this was probably more pronounced for Javier, since Leticia's Spanish was already well established by then.

A further difference in the children's experiences arose from advances in technology. Amaya provided Javier with many Spanish movies as she had with Leticia. However by that time DVDs had replaced videos, and Javier was able to change the Spanish soundtrack to English, the language he was more familiar with. Thus Spanish was not a necessity to be able to understand his favourite movies, as it had been for Leticia. Also Javier was getting used to watching television in English and interacting in English with his sister.

Identity

Identity as enacted in language is complex and multi-dimensional (Norton Peirce 1995). One of the few studies in Australia to explore the views of bilingual families on growing up with two languages shows how identity negotiation in everyday lived experiences, such as those described by Amaya, emphasise its nature as "transformative, changeable and hybrid" (Jones Diaz, 2005).

While the children were small, Amaya was preoccupied mainly with developing their language without thinking very much about whether her children identified as Australian, Spanish or a combination of the two. Then a conversation with Leticia at seven years old made Amaya think for the first time about identity issues. It happened when she and Jason had just divorced, and she was thinking about the possibility of taking the children back to Spain to live so they could have the support of her family. When she suggested this, Leticia reacted furiously saying:

Leticia: ¡Yo no quiero ir a tu país, Mamá! Tú quieres ir porque tienes toda tu familia allí
 [I don't want to go to your country, Mum! You want to go because you have all your family there]

It suddenly dawned on Amaya that Leticia now identified herself as purely Australian. While she could speak Spanish and she had a very close relationship with her Spanish family, Spain was *her mother's country* where *her mother's family* lived.

It is clear from Amaya's account that not only are there substantial differences in the way that Leticia and Javier relate to Spanish, but that their Spanish/Australian identities are fluid and constantly changing. Leticia at seven found her mother's accent and Spanish background embarrassing, but now at 15 she sees it as something desirable. This change is not uncommon: Caldas (2007), in a study of his bilingual children's self-perceptions, found that they valued their bilingualism and biculturalism much more as adolescents and young adults than when they were younger. One of them, Stephanie, commented, like Leticia, "... on how her American college friends now thought it was 'cool' that she was bilingual" (Caldas 2007:19).

Ironically, as we saw previously, Leticia's attitude towards her mother's language has sometimes been negative; she would not mind talking to her mother in Spanish but only in private. Yet Amaya reported that Javier's attitude has always been positive, as he always enjoyed showing off his Spanish in front of people. He used to say at school that he was born in Spain (although he was in fact born in Wollongong hospital), because he thought it was 'cool'. While we might think that language proficiency has a direct effect on attitude and identity, these children's experiences suggests that it is much more complex than this. Perhaps Javier's attitude to Spanish has been generally positive *because of* his lower proficiency, and hence Spanish is no threat to him.

As well as the children's perceptions of their own identity, Amaya realised that other people questioned her children's identity as shown in the following interaction she recounted between Javier and Steve, an Anglo-Australian friend of hers. They were discussing the 2006 Soccer World Cup, then in its early stages, and Steve asked Javier, "Who do you want to win, Spain or Australia?" Javier had trouble making sense of this question, and could not answer, since it did not seem to occur to him that he might be expected to have thought about the rivalry between the two countries to which Steve assumed he would have allegiance.

The day before a key match, they had this conversation:

Javier: So, what's going to happen if we win tomorrow?
Steve: Who are you talking about when you say 'we'?
Javier: [*With hesitation and surprise*] We, Australians

This interchange with Steve over allegiances in the World Cup shows that Javier sees himself as primarily Australian, at least in this context, and does not appear to share Steve's assumption that he must be internally conflicted over being a Spanish-Australian. This complexity of identities which children of migrants must negotiate has been referred to as a 'hyphenated belonging' (Winter and Pauwels, 2007:195).

Conclusion

At the ages of 15 (Leticia) and 11 (Javier) there are clear differences in language proficiency and identity. Leticia understands Spanish easily although her active vocabulary is still fairly limited. She is able to converse fluently, and her pronunciation and grammar are close to those of a native speaker.

Javier, however, understands only simple sentences, and his vocabulary is very limited.

Leticia is taking Spanish next year in high school to learn it at a more formal level, including developing reading and writing skills. She is thinking of becoming a tour guide, a flight attendant or a travel agent. Clearly her Spanish ability is influencing the decisions she is making about her future. Further, her attitude to Spanish has changed totally from her resistance in primary school, because her friends are now envious of her language skills.

Amaya is still concerned about Javier's Spanish. He is showing a great interest in learning, but she does not know how to help him improve. She finds she has to

translate often, making it impossible to have a fluent and relaxed conversation, and resulting in frustration for both of them.

Leticia will probably retain a level of fluency in Spanish, which will enable her to drop in and out of it as her life unfolds. Javier may not, but neither is he a total stranger to his mother's language and culture. Still, Amaya has difficulty accepting his lack of improvement in Spanish and it worries her that he won't be able to talk to his Spanish family or identify with that part of his heritage.

Even if Javier remains a 'receptive bilingual', there is evidence that there is much value in this goal, as shown by a study of the recovery of the first language (Spanish) by a six-year-old whose family had migrated to Britain. Over a six-week stay in Colombia the child reactivated her Spanish, which shows that there is great value in maintaining passive bilingualism as it can be reactivated very quickly (Uribe de Kellett 2002:178).

All in all it is clear that bringing children up bilingually involves joys and challenges and sometimes differential success, and it is influenced by many factors such as family structure, birth order, immersion experiences and the perceptions of others.

ⁱ All names are pseudonyms

ⁱⁱ 'Amama' is the familiar term in Basque for 'grandmother

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