

Breaking Down Our Bilingual Double Standard

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July 14, 2015



It was medieval emperor-king Charlemagne who said, “To have another language is to possess another soul.”

Considered by many to be the father of Europe, Charlemagne was a man of many languages, displaying a knack for Latin, Greek, and other European tongues. Yet

more than two millennia later, our views on multilingualism

have lost some of this nuanced perspective—despite research that demonstrates again and again just how beneficial it is to grow up multilingual.

Speaking at least two languages is known to improve multitasking and problem-solving skills, lead to greater future job opportunities, reduce one’s risk for dementia in later years, and give children insight into other cultures as they explore different cultural identities within themselves. And when a privileged child enriches her education by adding a second language—known as “additive bilingualism”—it’s generally acknowledged to be a positive, even prestigious, endeavor. But this isn’t the case when it comes to “subtractive bilingualism,” when a new language supplants the language spoken at home.

Claire Bower, associate professor of linguistics at Yale University, explains that for these children, their bilingualism tends to be viewed as a challenge to be overcome, rather than an opportunity to be embraced:

“The reasons for that are probably not to do with language, but more to do with ethnic identity and the fact that a lot of the groups that are adding English as a second language are already often underrepresented minorities, [such as Native Americans or Aboriginal Australians, whose educations occur in English, rather than their native languages], or immigrant groups.”

It’s true that when bilingual children from such groups enter the education system, they rarely sound like their native peers; it can also take them quite a long time to attain fluency in the language used by their fellow students and teachers. As a consequence, according to Bown, non-native speakers are often put in special education programs, which can carry a lasting stigma, as well as set back a student’s proficiency in a number of areas.

“The reason they don’t sound like native speakers of English, is because they are not native speakers of English—not because they have got a learning difficulty,” says Bown.

The fear that bilingualism could harm a child’s education creates early obstacles for language learning at home. When children who are acquiring two languages start to talk (around the age of one or two), it’s common for them to go through a stage in which they mix up the languages. This can mean that they won’t do as well as their monolingual peers in the early years of kindergarten, though according to Bown, these students soon catch up and may even surpass other students.

“There tends to be community resistance to bilingualism because there is this feeling that kids are not doing so well and they should just focus on one thing from the start. But like everything, if you start it early enough, you get really good at it, because you have a lot of time to practice and the skills become routine,” says Bown.

During a series of focus groups in 2013, the Clinton Foundation’s Too Small to Fail project found that “Spanish-only or Spanish-dominant Hispanic families reported worrying that speaking Spanish

at home could hurt kindergarten-readiness. But the research couldn't be more clear that children who speak two languages perform better in school and have more advanced executive function skills.”

Too Small to Fail is working to break down this resistance by encouraging bilingual households to celebrate diversity of language. Their *Pequeños y Valiosos* project (a partnership with Univision) aims to inspire Hispanic families to talk, read, and sing to their young children in the language they feel most comfortable using, which encourages language acquisition while boosting brain development.

However, even when bilingualism is encouraged in pre-school children, whether a child eventually reaches her potential may then depend on how governments approach bilingual education in later years. Claire Bower notes similarities in American and Australian attitudes toward indigenous and immigrant bilingualism, and in turn, how bilingualism in these communities is often approached as an educational problem to be solved, rather than an advantage to be exploited.

“The two countries are somewhat similar in that they have a small indigenous minority population, historically and currently discriminated against, but they also have large immigrant populations, and the immigrant populations are also historically and currently discriminated against,” she says.

A monolingual approach may make it easier, and less costly, to teach and assess educational aims and outcomes. However, as standardized English tests fail to allow for nuances of pronunciation, such assessments may not be an accurate reflection of a child's ability. As an example, Bower offers up test results from predominantly Aboriginal schools, which were compared to predominately white schools in North Queensland, Australia. “There were cases of the kids reading at pretty much the same level, but the aboriginal kids being coded as much lower because they have a different accent.”

In terms of indigenous languages, Australia's Northern Territory features schools with bilingual programs covering 34 languages and dialects. However, as education in Australia is overseen by state

and federal governments, bilingual school closures and the erosion of funding for such programs have become an ongoing bone of contention between local communities and the centralized legislature.

Bowern also likes to look to the Native American population in the United States, where reservations enjoy more autonomy than Aboriginal Australian communities, and it is easier for educators to teach local languages in tribal schools. However, children in these schools may still be disadvantaged by standardized English tests that do not allow for the subtleties of bilingualism.

“You could be the best school in the country on Navajo education and the kids would be, by qualitative measures, doing really well. They are attending school, they are engaged, and they are learning all about Navajo. They are transferring those skills to English and math. But if they are not doing well on the English portion of the standardized test score [then] that score, and those teachers, are going to be marked as failures,” says Bowern.

Bowern suggests that rather than trying to “fix the problem” of bilingualism by finding ways to improve the standardized test results of bilingual children, it would be more useful to allow for nuances in language and accent when interpreting test scores. Even better, she says, to set a maximum amount of time in the curriculum for core test subjects such as English and math, then give schools the flexibility to tailor other parts of the curriculum to the specific needs of local communities (be they cultural, athletic, or language-related), without paying the perceived penalty of cutting back on what seemed to be more “important” subjects.

By supporting bilingualism in schools and at home, all children who speak more than one language—whatever their native tongue—might have the opportunity to enjoy the benefits that bilingualism ought to afford them.