

THE ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF  
BILINGUALISM:

The story of two families

Bachelor's thesis

Ellinoora Takala

University of Jyväskylä

Department of Languages

English

January 2016

## JYVÄSKYLÄN YLIOPISTO

Tiedekunta – Faculty Humanistinen Tiedekunta	Laitos – Department Kielten Laitos
Tekijä – Author Ellinoora Takala	
Työn nimi – Title The advantages and disadvantages of raising a child bilingual: The story of two families	
Oppiaine – Subject Englannin kieli	Työn laji – Level Kandidaatin tutkinto
Aika – Month and year Tammikuu 2016	Sivumäärä – Number of pages 15
Tiivistelmä – Abstract <p>Kandidaatin tutkielmani aihe on kaksikielisyys ja lasten kasvattaminen kaksikielisiksi. Tutkielmani perustuu kahteen tapaus-tutkimukseen, joita varten haastattelin kahta kaksikielisen perheen äitiä. Perheiden elämäntilanteet olivat hyvin erilaiset, joten sain haastatteluista paljon monipuolista tietoa, jota pystyin vertailemaan.</p> <p>Keskityin tutkielmassani etenkin kaksikielisyyden hyviin ja huonoihin puoliin, sillä niitä ei ole vielä tähän mennessä tutkittu kovin monipuolisesti. Halusin varsinkin ottaa selvää, mitä huonoja puolia kaksikielisyydellä on, sillä niistä löytyy melko vähän tietoa.</p> <p>Tutkimuksessani tuli esille enemmän hyviä kuin huonoja puolia. Hyviä puolia haastatteluiden ja käyttämäni taustakirjallisuuden mukaan ovat muun muassa uusien kielten oppimisen helpottuminen, työnhaussa kielitaito on hyödyksi työmarkkinoiden kansainvälistymisen takia ja avoimempi suhtautuminen toisiin kulttuureihin.</p> <p>Huonot puolet, jotka tutkimuksessani tulivat ilmi, ovat se, että lapsi ei välttämättä ole halukas oppimaan tai käyttämään toista kieltä ja vähemmistökielen opettaminen lapselle toisena kielenä saattaa olla haastavaa. Kyseiset ongelmat ovat kuitenkin melko harvinaisia.</p>	

Asiasanat – Keywords Bilingualism, Parenting, Children
Säilytyspaikka – Depository JYX
Muita tietoja – Additional information

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION	5
2 LITERATURE REVIEW	6
2.1 Bilingualism	6
2.2 Raising a bilingual child	7
2.3 Effects of bilingualism on a child	8
2.4 Summary	9
3 THE PRESENT STUDY	9
3.1 Research questions	9
3.2 Description of the data	10
3.3 Methods of analysis	10
3.4 Interview questions	11
4 TWO CASE STUDIES ON RAISING CHILDREN BILINGUAL	12
4.1 Backgrounds of the families	12
4.2 Strategies for raising children bilingual	12
4.3 The children's attitudes towards bilingualism	14
4.4 Advantages versus disadvantages of bilingualism	14
4.5 Discussion of the results	15
5 CONCLUSION	17
BIBLIOGRAPHY	18

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

The title of my thesis is “The advantages and disadvantages of raising a child bilingual: based on two case studies”. I chose this topic because I have been interested in bilingualism for a long time and wanted to explore it in more detail. I decided to focus on the advantages and disadvantages of raising children bilingual, because most of the books and research articles only focus on the advantages of bilingualism. I wanted to get a more versatile view on bilingualism by doing a case study on both the advantages and the disadvantages of raising a child bilingual. I interviewed the mothers in two bilingual families to get their opinion on bilingualism and raising children bilingual.

There are many different definitions for bilingualism, but the most common definition according to Hamers and Blanc (2000:6) is that the people who can speak two languages as native languages can be defined as bilingual. I will also use that definition in my thesis when I refer to bilingualism or bilingual people.

In my thesis first I will introduce the main theories of bilingualism and raising children bilingual. By providing an overview of different background sources I will explain bilingualism and the different definitions that it has. I will also mention a few techniques that have been used by parents when raising bilingual children and the effects that bilingualism might have on the children.

After introducing the background literature I will go into more detail of how I have done my research, what my research questions are and I will also give a list of the questions that I used in my two semi-structured case study interviews.

In my results and discussion chapter I will explain my research and findings thoroughly. By analysing the information that I got from the interviews I will compare the two families and answer my research questions.

## **2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

My research draws on previous research done on the topic that focuses on both the advantages and the disadvantages of bilingualism. In this literature review the different definitions of bilingualism will be presented first. Then the process of raising bilingual children will be discussed. Finally, the positive and negative effects of bilingualism will be mentioned with regard to children.

### **2.1 Bilingualism**

The word "bilingualism" has several different definitions. Hamers and Blanc (2000:6) define bilingualism as "the state of a linguistic community in which two languages are in contact with the result that two codes can be used in the same interaction and that a number of individuals are bilingual". Webster's dictionary's (1961, as cited in Hamers and Blanc 2000:6) definition of bilingualism is "Having or using two languages especially as spoken with the fluency characteristic of a native speaker; a person using two languages especially habitually and with control like that of a native speaker; the constant oral use of two languages". So, according to this definition only the people who can speak two languages perfectly can be defined as bilingual.

There is, however, a more flexible interpretation of the term. Macnamara's (1967, as cited in Hamers and Blanc 2000:6) believes that anyone who can speak, write, read or understand another language besides his or her native language even to a small extent can be defined as bilingual.

Besides these two different views on bilingualism, there are also many others that are somewhere between the two extremes. For example, Titone defines bilingualism as "the individual's capacity to speak a second language while following the concepts and structures of that language rather than paraphrasing his or her mother tongue" (Titone 1972, as cited in Hamers and Blanc 2000:7). Mohanty (1994:13) takes a similar approach by claiming that "bilingual persons and communities are those with an ability to meet the communicative demands of the self and the society in their normal functioning in two or

more languages in their interaction with the other speakers of any or all of these languages”.

It is very difficult to provide only one correct definition because all the definitions mentioned before raise questions, such as, what is meant by native-like competence or by minimal proficiency in a second language. (Hamers and Blanc 2000:7). In the present study I am following the more restrictive approach to bilingualism and focus on the native-like speakers of two languages who can use and switch languages fluently.

## **2.2 Raising a bilingual child**

Usually raising and "teaching" a child to acquire two languages and ultimately become bilingual starts at a very early age, when the child has not yet started to speak at all. When the parents have different native languages, the easiest way for a parent is to talk to the child in one's native language from early on. This is also called the one-parent-one language approach. When the parents speak different languages with and to the child, he or she will most likely automatically acquire both languages. Consistency is the key. (Barron-Hauwaert, 2011:38-39).

The children can also become bilinguals if the parents speak the language at home. According to Ragueanaud (2009:21-23) one strategy is the one parent-one environment method where the children only speak one language at home and another language outside of home. There are also, for example, foreign language schools and immersion programs in which children use a second language most of the time and that way acquire a second language. Baker (2000:14) says that the parents can also hire a nanny or a babysitter who speaks a different language or have playdates with children who speak another language. The most important factor is that the child hears, speaks, reads and writes in another language as much as possible and from as young age as possible.

### **2.3 Effects of bilingualism on a child**

Most of the effects of bilingualism on children have proved to be positive. For example, Raquenaud (2009) lists the benefits of bilingualism that she found based on her own experience and research with regard to children.

The first benefit that Raquenaud (2009) mentions is that bilingualism bonds families. When children are able to speak both of their parents' native languages they automatically feel a lot closer to their parents, because language is a very important part of bonding. It also keeps the childrens extended family closer, because they are able to talk, for example, with their grandparents. That way the languages help maintaining family and social relations.

Bilingualism also has a positive effect on the child's academic skills. Studies have shown that speaking two languages helps the brain to multitask, memorize and learn new things more easily. Bilingual children also tend to be more global-minded from a young age, because they have usually been surrounded by at least two different cultures their whole life, and that way they have learned to understand and appreciate different cultures.

One of the most important positive effects that bilingualism has on children and their lives according to Raguenaud (2009:116) is the "competitive advantage in the workplace" in the future. Today when the labour market has become global, it is often required to speak a second language when applying for a job. The people that have been raised bilingual can speak two languages fluently, which often helps them to find a job more easily than the ones who are monolingual. Bilinguals also have better opportunities to work abroad.

There are also some possible negative effects of bilingualism on children. Fernald (2006:19-30) compares monolingual and bilingual infants' competences of "distinguishing between the ambient language and another language they have never been exposed to". The results are that monolingual infants distinguish characteristics of their native language better and faster than bilingual infants. One of the reasons for these



results discussed in the research paper is that bilingual children "hear less speech in either languages than monolingual infants hear in the single language they are exposed to" (Fernald 2006:24). However, this language delay does not last very long, because bilingual children usually catch up to other children within a year or two.

## **2.4 Summary**

There are many different definitions for bilingualism, including restrictive and broader approaches. The parenting guides, such as the one written by Raguenaud (2009), mostly only focus on the advantages which are, for example, that bilingualism helps children to memorize and learn new languages and it also bonds families. Fernald (2006), on the other hand, points out some of the disadvantages. She mentions for example language delay as one of the disadvantages which, however, only lasts for about a year.

## **3 THE PRESENT STUDY**

### **3.1 Research questions**

The aim of my study is to explore the advantages and disadvantages of raising a bilingual child with the help of two case studies of bilingual families. I am also going to investigate some of the reasons why parents decide to raise their children bilingual. My study focuses on the following research questions:

1. What are the effects of bilingualism on a child?
2. What are the reasons for some parents to decide to raise their child bilingual and some not to do so?
3. In the opinion of the parents, are there more advantages to bilingualism than disadvantages?

### **3.2 Description of the data**

The research is based on two case studies, and the data is collected in the form of semi-structured interviews. One of the interviewees is a woman who was raised by a Finnish-speaking mother and a Swedish-speaking father, so she herself is bilingual and speaks both Finnish and Swedish. Her children are also bilingual. The other interviewee is also a woman, but she is not bilingual because she only speaks Finnish as a native language, although she is also able to communicate very well in English. She has a husband whose native language is English. They live in Wales and they have two children, aged 2 and 6. Even though they have had the capacity to raise their children bilingual, their children only speak English.

Both of the interviews were done in Finnish and took place at the end of May 2015. The first interview was done face to face and the latter via skype. I had a certain amount of pre-decided questions (listed in 3.4) that I asked in the interviews, but I also raised some additional questions. I chose these particular families because they show what it is like to raise children bilingual in two official languages (Finnish and Swedish) and in a majority and a minority language (English and Finnish). The interviews gave me the opportunity to compare the two different situations and backgrounds and their effects on the children. The reason why I decided to interview only the mothers of the families was because they were more involved in their children's bilingual acquisition process than the fathers.

### **3.3 Methods of analysis**

After interviewing the mothers, I transcribed the relevant parts of the interviews and analysed the data to find answers to my research questions. I took into consideration the fact that the interviewees' backgrounds and home countries are different.

Hamel, Dufour and Fortin mention (1993) that there are various methods that can be used in case studies, such as interviews, participant observations and field studies. According to them, a case study's goals are “ to reconstruct and analyze a case from a sociological

perspective.” (1993:1). A sociological perspective is that “the case study strives to highlight the features or attributes of social life.”(Hamel et al.1993:2). Bilingualism can be seen from a sociological perspective because language in general is a feature of social life. The aim of my analysis was to achieve the goal mentioned above by analyzing bilingualism from a sociological perspective.

### **3.4 Questions in the interviews**

The interviews were semi-structured which means that I asked a number of pre-decided open questions, but I also raised some follow-up questions when needed. I chose this interviewing method, because it helped me receive the information I needed. I chose the following questions because they are specific and encouraged the interviewees to give long responses and that way give more information about the topic.

- 1.Do you know many bilingual people?
- 2.Are your children bilingual? If so, which factors made you decide to raise them bilingual? If not, which factors made you decide not to do so?
- 3.Which languages do you and your spouse use when talking to your children? Which language/languages do you use when you are spending time together as a family?
- 4.Have you noticed that being bilingual has effected your children's lives somehow?
- 5.How have you raised your children bilingual? Have you used any certain techniques?
- 6.What do you think of bilingualism? Do you think it has any advantages or disadvantages?

## **4 TWO CASE STUDIES ON RAISING CHILDREN BILINGUAL**

### **4.1 Backgrounds of the families**

I interviewed two mothers of bilingual families for my thesis. The first interview took place on 28. May 2015 and it was done in Finnish via Skype. The interview lasted 30 minutes. The mother, aged 33, speaks Finnish as her mother tongue. She graduated from a university of applied sciences and works currently as a secretary. Her husband speaks English as his mother tongue. He majored in education at university and works as a police officer. They have two young children: a seven-year-old son and a two-year-old girl. The children are not bilingual. They speak English as their mother tongue and know only a little bit of Finnish, but understand it quite well. The family lives in Wales, where the official languages are English and Welsh.

The second interview was done face-to-face in Finnish. It also lasted 30 minutes and took place on 5. June 2015. The mother herself is bilingual and speaks both Swedish and Finnish. She has a master's degree in theology and works as a kinder garden teacher. Her husband's mother tongue is Finnish, he went to vocational school and works as a charterer. They have two Finnish-Swedish bilingual children: a seven-year-old boy and a five-year-old girl. They live in a Finnish-speaking area in Finland.

### **4.2 Strategies for raising children bilingual**

Strategies that the parents use when they are raising their children bilingual can vary especially depending on the parents' background, the languages that they want their children to acquire and the role of the languages in their homecountry or the area they live in. The differences in the use of methods can be seen in the data that I received from the interviews that I conducted.

The parents who live in Wales have searched for information on the ways of raising children bilingual. The mother read some tips and information on the Internet on how to raise children bilingual and on bilingualism in general. She also read a PhD thesis on that subject.

The family speaks English a lot more than Finnish at home because everyone understands and can speak it. The mother speaks Finnish with their children when she is alone with them. When they are visiting Finland or Skyping to some family members in Finland then the language is almost only Finnish because the children's grandparents do not speak English that well. Sometimes the mother needs to interpret what is said in Finnish into English for her children. The father does not know any Finnish, so whenever he is visiting Finland with the rest of the family, they tend to speak more English.

The seven-year-old son goes to an English-speaking school, but her mother takes him to a Suomi-school once a month for two hours to play with other children whose parents are Finnish. The teachers speak only Finnish there to help the children to improve their Finnish. They also sometimes meet with other Finnish-speaking families in Wales whom they have met through the Suomi-school.

The mother has used a lot of Finnish material to help her children learn Finnish. They sometimes watch Finnish children's films and cartoons on DVD and they sometimes read Finnish children's books and the ABC book. They also have some Finnish computer games to learn the colours in Finnish. They sometimes use the mother's old Finnish exercise books to learn more Finnish.

The other family's children speak Swedish with their mother and Finnish with their father. The children speak both languages with each other. They speak Finnish when the whole family is together. The children go to a Swedish-speaking school because the parents think that the children will get to speak Finnish a lot already because the main language in Finland is Finnish and they live in a Finnish-speaking area.

Neither of the parents has read any books or tips about bilingualism or how to raise children bilingual because the mother has a lot of experience on that since she herself was raised bilingual. The parents try to be very consistent with the languages. The mother who lives in Finland said: "Johdonmukaisuus on kaikkein tärkeintä." (In English: Consistency is the key). Sometimes they read fairytales in both of the languages to their children and the children watch only Finnish cartoons. The family has a lot of bilingual

friends which makes bilingualism very natural to them.

#### **4.3 The children's attitudes towards bilingualism**

The parents in the first family have had a lot of difficulties in trying to raise their two children bilingual. Both of the children understand Finnish quite well, but they do not speak it. Especially the son has not learned Finnish as much as the mother had hoped. At first the mother had spoken a lot of Finnish with him, but after he started school, he has begun to refuse to speak Finnish and finds learning this language frustrating. He has also felt that he does not need to learn Finnish because everyone speaks English in Wales. He also finds the pronunciation of Finnish very difficult because it does not resemble the pronunciation of English.

Because of all of the reasons mentioned above the mother has decided to speak less Finnish with her son, so that he will not start to think about the Finnish language negatively. However she is going to try to teach her two-year-old daughter Finnish, and so far the daughter is able to understand the language and finds learning the language enjoyable.

In the second family there have not been any problems in raising the children bilingual. The children are fluent in both Finnish and Swedish, and language learning has been very natural and easy. According to the mother, "Kaksikielisyydessä ei ole ollut mitään ongelmia, vaan kaikki on sujunut täysin luonnollisesti.". (In English: There have not been any problems with bilingualism and everything has gone very naturally.) The reason for this has been mainly the fact that both of the languages are spoken in Finland and the children hear and speak both of the languages daily. The mother is also bilingual, so that has made bilingualism very natural to their children and the mother has known what to do.

#### **4.4 Advantages versus disadvantages of bilingualism**

Both of the families agreed that there are more advantages than disadvantages to bilingualism. For example, they think that bilingualism opens doors in the future when

they are looking for jobs. The mother from the first family said: “Lapsillani on tulevaisuudessa mahdollista työskennellä ulkomaillaakin kielitaitonsa ansiosta.”. (In English: The children will be able to work in other countries more easily.) The parents also think that being bilingual will help them to learn other languages and increase the children's interest in learning new languages. The children will also be more open-minded towards other cultures because they themselves have experience in two different cultures and understand them better.

The first family's mother believes that there is one disadvantage to raising children bilingual from her own experience. She thinks that it is not good to force children to learn another language if they do not want to learn it because if a child is forced to learn a language he or she might start to think negatively about the language. So, even though there are many advantages in bilingualism it is very difficult to raise a child bilingual if he or she does not want to.

#### **4.5 Discussion of the results**

The families in my case study have very different situations. In the first family one of the languages (English) is the main language in the country and everyone speaks it and the other language (Finnish) is a minority language and almost no one speaks it in their surroundings. That makes it more challenging for the children to learn the other minority language. They do not think that it is useful, especially since in English-speaking countries not that many people speak a second language.

In the second family the situation is completely different because both Finnish and Swedish are official languages of Finland, and they are equally important. The children have also had the possibility to go to a Swedish-speaking school and live in a Finnish-speaking neighbourhood, and that way get to use both languages daily. They also have the advantage of having a bilingual parent who understands their situation and is able to make bilingualism natural in the family.

With the help of both the interviews and background literature, I could find answers to all

three of my research questions. My first research question was: “What are the effects of bilingualism on a child?” . The answer to that question based on the interviews was that the effects of bilingualism depend a lot on the child, his or her background and whether the languages that the child is learning are majority or minority languages. A good example is the different attitudes that the children in the two families have on bilingualism and using two languages. The children of the family that lives in Wales have had a lot of difficulties with learning Finnish because it is a minority language and quite useless in Wales. In contrast, the children of the other family have had no difficulties in becoming bilingual and learning both Finnish and Swedish because both Finnish and Swedish are official languages in Finland.

My second research question was “What are the reasons for some parents to decide to raise their child bilingual and some to not do so?” Based on the interviews and the background literature that I used the answer depends a lot on the parents and their children. Usually the main reason why some parents want to raise their children bilingual is because they themselves are bilingual, like in the Finnish family, or the parents speak different native languages, like in the family that lives in Wales. Another reason could be that the family lives in a country where the majority language is other than their native languages. Baker (2000:14) claims that it is also possible that monolingual parents who speak the same native language want their children to be raised bilingual. In that case the children learn a second language outside their family, for example, at a school where the official language is other than the one that the parents speak.

The answer to my third research question “Are there more advantages to bilingualism than disadvantages?” based on my findings is simply yes, even though there are some disadvantages, such as the fact that it is almost impossible to teach a child a second language if he or she is reluctant because children cannot be forced to become bilingual. Another disadvantage could be that a child can find it frustrating to learn another language, especially if the other language is a minority language and not used often in their home country. The list of the advantages is a lot longer. They are, for example, the fact that nowadays people who speak more than one language have better chances in



finding a good job because the world is becoming more and more global. Other advantages are that learning languages is usually easier for bilingual children and they are also more open-minded towards other cultures. (Raguenaud 2009:114-115).

Because of these major differences between the families, their situations cannot be compared. However they are very good examples of different situations and challenges that parents face when trying to raise their children bilingual. Usually one of the biggest issues is the importance of the languages in the homecountry. It is almost always more difficult to teach a child a minority language which he or she might find unimportant than to teach him or her two major or official languages.

## **5 CONCLUSION**

In my research I focused on raising children bilingual and conducted two semi structured interviews to get more practical information on the topic. I also used some background literature to understand the main theories of bilingualism.

Conducting two case study interviews with families with very different life situations and backgrounds provides two different views on bilingualism and what it is like to raise children bilingual. One of the most interesting findings was the fact that if a child does not want to learn a second language, he or she cannot be forced to become bilingual. Before I began my research, I had assumed that raising children bilingual would be fairly easy. I was quite surprised to learn that it is not infact so.

There were not many difficulties or problems in my research, although I would have hoped to find more information on the disadvantages of bilingualism. However, there does not seem to be as many disadvantages to bilingualism as there are advantages. I think that I would need to conduct more interviews and collect more data to explore this.

My research topic could be studied further by, for example, focusing more on the differences between bilingual children who speak two majority languages and children

who speak either two minority languages or a minority language and a majority language. I noticed already in my study that there seem to be some differences in the children's attitudes towards bilingualism and which methods the parents use when teaching their children bilingual.

## **Bibliography**

Baker, C. (2000). *A Parents' and Teachers' Guide to Bilingualism*. Multilingual Matters: Clevedon, England; Buffalo, NY.

Barron-Hauwaert, S. (2011). *Bilingual siblings : language use in families*. Multilingual Matters: Bristol, Buffalo.

Hamel, J., Dufour, S. and Fortin, D. (1993). *Case study methods*. SAGE: Newbury Park, CA.

Hamers, J.F. And Blanc, M. (2000). *Bilinguality and Bilingualism*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

Fernald, A. (2006). *Childhood Bilingualism: Research on infancy through school age*. Multilingual Matters: Clevedon.

Mohanty, A. K. (1994). *Bilingualism in a Multilingual Society: Psychosocial and Pedagogical Implications*. Mysore: Central Institute of Indian Languages.

Raguenaud, V. (2009). *Bilingual by choice: Raising kids in two (or more!) languages*. Nicholas Brealey Pub: Boston.