

Why it's OK for bilingual children to mix languages

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Few would consider mastering more than one language a bad idea. In fact, research points to a number of cognitive, economic and academic advantages in being bilingual.

Parents who speak different languages understand the family home is an important setting to learn both, and seek [various ways](#) to help their [children](#) thrive bilingually. One of the best-known approaches is the "[one-parent-one-language](#)" strategy (OPOL). Each parent uses one [language](#) when communicating with their child, so their offspring learn both languages simultaneously.

OPOL emphasises [consistency](#) – sticking to one language each – as key to its approach. But this creates the myth that mixing languages should always be avoided. [My recent study](#), part of a [new wave of multilingualism studies](#), would suggest this received wisdom is just that: a myth.

My research looked at Japanese-British families living in the UK with pre and early school-age children who were following a more-or-less strict OPOL language policy. I was particularly interested in examining the impact of OPOL in the family home – how does this unique language environment affect the way children use languages?

Most of the Japanese mothers who participated in my research were fluent in Japanese and English, while the fathers possessed an elementary grasp of Japanese. This made English the primary language of communication between the parents and outside the home. For this reason, the mothers were careful to carve out additional space for more sustained Japanese language learning with their children. In other words, this dedicated space for communicating in Japanese (the minority language) was time children would spend exclusively with their mother. This seemed to create a connection between "Japanese language" and "motherhood" in the children's perception.

This link became apparent in how children used Japanese as a means of emotional bonding with their mother and adopted a much broader behavioural "repertoire" than usually associated with language. For

example, switching to Japanese could sometimes serve as a method to appease mum when she seemed unhappy. At other times, refusing to communicate in Japanese was a useful means of defiance, even when the dispute was not related to language.

Language can never be a neutral communication tool. How it is used at home and beyond – socially, at school, in the workplace – brings additional connotations and meanings which are used consciously or unconsciously in communication.

Creativity with language

The OPOL approach emphasises the need for parents to monitor children's language closely and correct them if they mix the two languages. In practice, many parents speaking the minority language are bilingual themselves – so they understand what their children are saying even when they do mix the two. Parents may feel it is difficult to keep correcting children when they mix languages because they just want to have a meaningful conversation whatever language their child uses. This is especially the case when children show annoyance at being corrected.

But what if a child uses language that is difficult to categorise into either Japanese or English? An example involved the use of English words absorbed into Japanese pronunciation. One of many borrowed words adorning the Japanese language, "ice cream" is usually pronounced "[aisukurimu](#)", emphasising the general feature of vowel-ending sounds in Japanese.

The distinction between singular and plural does not exist in Japanese nouns in the English language sense, so whether using singular or plural, even in a borrowed word, "aisukurimu" is the form normally used. But one of my child participants showed his mother a drawing of two cones of ice cream and described them as "aisukurimuzu", with a Japanese

pronunciation but in English plural form. The child had created something in between, perhaps to avoid being corrected.

Another example is interaction between Japanese-English bilingual siblings. A six-year old girl was trying to convince her four-year old brother to let her play with his toys. Following firm rejections by her brother, the girl drew on her communicative repertoire to convince him.

First she shifted from an authoritative demand to a softer and humbler request. She rephrased the question by using various polite forms. Then her voice changed nasally, suggesting that she was about to burst into tears. Even more interestingly, while the negotiation had begun in English, in the middle she shifted to Japanese.

Although this may give the impression of language mixing, a considerably more complex process was taking place. The shift was accompanied by the incorporation of Japanese cultural elements, such as [honorific titles](#) that emphasise emotional attachment, a relationship of dependence between sister and brother, and an assumed obligation to care by the brother. She succeeded.

A more holistic approach

These examples show how creatively and strategically human beings use language in their daily communication. Whether bilingual or not, we all constantly select from our repertoire anything that will best serve our purpose. For instance, imagine you want to ask a favour from your neighbour. You would use polite language in a friendly voice. But what about your facial expression? Your body language? For bilinguals, shifting between languages is all part of their repertoire.

Our language repertoires are shaped by meaning, based on the knowledge garnered throughout our lives. And the ways we use language

also shape its meaning. So ways of using OPOL in the family bring specific meaning to language used at home, and children make full use of its emergent meaning in their own interactions.

The popularity of OPOL rests on its commonsense simplicity, which is mostly that it is consistent. But when we see a child actively using, adapting and negotiating their repertoire, it casts doubt on the belief that it's bad for children to mix languages. What it could actually be doing is demonstrating high-level flexibility and interpersonal skills.

Being bilingual is not simply about being able to speak two languages. Rigidly policing consistency in the one-parent-one-language approach could actually restrict bilingual children's linguistic ability and creativity. And in the same way, it could also limit their parents' ability to reveal their own bilingual skills, using their own repertoires.

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