



To Raise a Bilingual or a Monolingual Child: Concerns of an Immigrant Mother

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Abstract

The number of immigrant families in Canada and other Western countries has increased in the last several decades. Immigrant families face challenges in bringing up their children in a new country, such as different expectations from two different cultures, being away from their family and immediate support network, financial problems, and language limitations. One of the main concerns of most immigrant parents is their child's language acquisition. Language development is the most significant predictor of children's success in school and later life. Regarding the vital role of language development in each aspect of life, it is essential to explore this growing population's experiences and challenges related to their children's language acquisition. This qualitative study benefited from a narrative inquiry for representing and interpreting an immigrant mother's experiences and challenges in bringing up a bilingual child in Canada. This paper addresses the multiple conflicts affecting immigrant parents' decision to bring up a bilingual or monolingual child. Some of immigrant parents' main concerns, including passing on their accents, code-switching, language delays, limited social interactions and using screen time for teaching language are discussed in this paper.

Keywords: narrative inquiry, bilingual, language acquisition, accent, code-switching

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Introduction

Recently, the study of young bilingual children's language development has seen a significant surge in interest among researchers. This increase is related to two primary factors: first, a growing awareness of bilingualism's importance because of the increasing number of bilingual children around the world and, second, the increased interest in language acquisition studies in general (Schwartz et al., 2016). One group that has gained attention regarding their language acquisition is bilingual children. The first years of life are essential to language development, and it is vital to expose children appropriately during these years (Thompson, 2001). Children's early experiences with language input are critical to their language acquisition (Snow, 1995) which has a significant role in many aspects of children's lives, such as their educational pathway and career development during adulthood (Kieffer, 2012; Lee, 2011).

During this time, most children have the most interaction with their parents or caregivers. Most parents have some concerns about their child's language acquisition and wonder how to best facilitate their child's language development (De Houwer, 2017). Children's language acquisition can be an area of concern for immigrant parents. In addition to the common concerns that monolingual parents have, parents of bilingual children have essential questions about the costs and benefits of bilingualism and how to best support their children's language acquisition (Schwartz et al., 2016).

In this paper, I share my experiences in treating my 28-month-old son's language development, my insights from different positionalities, and concerns that I have had during this time. Then, I examine the literature to determine whether the literature supports what I have done. As an immigrant mother, I consider these narratives as personal, emotional, and intellectual. My experiences as an immigrant mother, some of which will be explored here, have led me to understand the central research question: How can I best support my son's language acquisition? My main goal through the current paper is to add another voice to the limited number of shared experiences by using narrative inquiry to explore practical and conceptual possibilities to better understand the challenges that immigrant parents experience in their child's language acquisition.

I benefited from using narrative inquiry as a methodology in this paper to explore my experiences in bringing up a bilingual child. My experiences are presented through the stories to provide insight to those who have concerns to find the best way to facilitate their child's language acquisition. Mairs (1993) believes that telling our stories is a gift; our stories potentially offer readers companionship when they desperately need it. Also, writing difficult stories is a gift to self, as they provide an opportunity to build meaning in life and to heal or grow from our pain (Ellis, 2007). Before discussing this special issue, I explore the narrative inquiry methodology and explicate the practice of narrative inquiry.

Methodology

This paper benefited from a qualitative narrative inquiry. Qualitative research is broadly situated within interpretivism, reflexive or constructivist paradigms. It aims at producing explanations and arguments by taking richness, depth, nuance, context, multidimensionality and complexity into account to explain how things work in particular contexts (Mason, 2017). The

narrative inquiry as a methodological framework uses stories as the portal through which human experience is represented and made meaningful both individually and socially (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Narrative inquiry explores experience as a story (Clandinin et al., 2007). It provides a unique and rich resource for understanding the inner experience of how social and individual forces may interact (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative inquiry provides a way to uncover people's stories, construct the meaning of the past, and understand the connections to the present (Riessman, 2008).

This study took a qualitative narrative approach and emphasized understanding an immigrant mother's narratives in depth to develop a comprehension of immigrant parents' concerns and experiences in bringing up a bilingual child. It aimed to clarify the circumstances, experiences and concerns that immigrant parents experience in bringing up a bilingual child. Most of the research studies on bilingual children either compare bilingual children's language development with monolingual children or evaluate particular bilingual programs (e.g., De Houwer, 2017; Rubio-Fernández, 2017). Narrative inquiry, however, is rarely used to explore parents' complex, lived experiences as a vital angle to examine bilingual children's language acquisition (Byers-Heinlein & Lew-Williams, 2013). Utilizing narrative inquiry allows tremendous potential for providing a more complete and thorough profile of a bilingual child's language acquisition.

Bilingual or Monolingual

Minority languages are dying out around the world, as some minority individuals have little or no interest in teaching their child their minority language, as they prefer that their children learn internationally recognized languages. They think learning an international language might be more beneficial for their child's education and for finding jobs in the future (Lauchlan et al., 2013). However, some parents choose to teach their child both a minority and majority language and bring up their children as bilingual.

Some bilingual children are brought up speaking one language only during his/her early years, and they will acquire another language once their first language has been established (Ortega, 2014). These children are taught the minority language at home, and they begin to learn the majority language when they attend either childcare or kindergarten (Hopp et al., 2019). Some other bilingual children learn two languages at the same time (Ortega, 2014). However, for these children the language they hear at home is usually the minority language. Achieving proficiency in their home language is valuable for developing an ethnic identity and positive family relationships for these children, while achieving proficiency in the majority language is essential for academic and occupational achievement (Oh & Fuligni, 2010).

The first thing I decided was that I would choose a planned bilingualism approach for my son. I decided to teach him my heritage language as well as the majority language at the same time. There were several reasons for this decision. Some of my reasons are personal in addition to having many benefits for my son. First, I prefer for my son to use his parents' language at home, even though my child also needs to function in the world outside the front door. This is the bilingual setting situation. In this situation, my son is taught Persian (his mother tongue) at home and learns English mostly in an English-speaking setting. I also desire for my son to be familiar with his parents' culture and background. I prefer to give him the opportunity to develop an identity that is connected to my cultural heritage. I believe that teaching a language provides a bridge toward

developing familiarity with a culture. Cervantes (2002) believes bilingualism is equivalent to biculturalism. Therefore, I provide optimal stimulation for my child and support his cultural identity by speaking my home language. Moreover, I would like my son to be connected with his relatives in Iran. My son needs to know Persian, as most of his relatives are not able to speak English to communicate with him.

The other reasons for taking this approach are related to my son's development. Bilingualism does seem to entail certain linguistic costs, as compared to monolinguals, bilinguals suffer from a disadvantage in word retrieval during speech production, even in their first language. For instance, when speaking in a first language, bilinguals are slower and produce fewer words than monolinguals (Gollan et al., 2011; Sadat et al., 2012; Sandoval et al., 2010). Also, long and intense exposure to a second language accompanied by a reduction in the use of the first language may lead to the phenomenon of language attrition (Keijzer, 2004; Schmid, 2007). Despite the practical disadvantages of knowing more than one language, the benefits of being bilingual outweigh its disadvantages (Baker & Wright, 2017). Part of these benefits are related to cognitive abilities, such as attention management, problem solving and increased creativity. Also, bilingualism is related to more personal and professional opportunities, increased ease of communication while travelling, a wider choice of schools, and more job opportunities (Baker & Wright, 2017; Friesen et al., 2015; Lauchlan et al., 2013; Lee Swanson et al., 2021; Leslie et al., 2005; Rubio-Fernández, 2017). The findings of a study by Lauchlan and colleagues (2013) underline the cognitive benefits of learning a minority language as a second language equivalent to international language learning. Furthermore, the advantage of early second language learning is particularly noticeable in the areas of phonology, pronunciation and speaking in a way that sounds like native-born individuals (Gordon, 2007). Considering these factors, I have been determined to bring up my son as bilingual.

My Concerns and Limitations

In this section, I share the main concerns I have and the challenges I have faced during my son's language acquisition as an immigrant mother.

Language Delay

The first thing I was worried about was whether bilingualism might put my son at risk of language delay. Language delay is a communication disorder. Children who have a language delay do not meet the language developmental milestones for their age, and their language abilities develop at a slower rate than average children. These children can have trouble expressing themselves or understanding others (Dale et al., 2003). There is a misconception that bilingualism causes delays in language acquisition. I have heard a lot of stories from my immigrant friends about how teaching two languages can cause language delays in their children, and some of them decided that their child would only learn the majority language to prevent this issue. One of my friends told me, "Do not risk it; if he wants, he can learn Persian in the future." One immigrant parent also told me her son had a language delay and did not speak until he was 26 months old. She believed this happened because she tried to teach her son both her heritage language and

English. But when she understood her son had a silent period and his language development was behind the average child, she changed her mind, and now her son only speaks English.

Byers-Heinlein and Lew-Williams (2013) claimed that a similar proportion of bilinguals will have a language delay or disorder as monolingual children. There is no evidence that bilingualism leads to language difficulties in general (Armon-Lotem et al., 2015; Gort, 2019). Bilingual and monolingual infants learn their first words at the same time (Genesee, 2003; Gort, 2019). Bilingual toddlers acquire the vocabulary of each language more slowly, but their overall vocabulary across the two languages is on par with that of their monolingual toddlers (Core, Hoff, Rumiche & Señor, 2013).

It is important to remember that some children acquire their first words much earlier than other children. A delay in this milestone does not necessarily mean there is something wrong; in most cases, it means the child has taken longer to reach this stage (Gort, 2019). My experience in bringing up a bilingual child supports the literature's assertion that bilingualism is not related to language delays. Even though some immigrant parents connect their child's language delay with their bilingualism, there might be other reasons behind it.

Speaking English like a Native Speaker in the Local Context

The other concern I have had is about passing on my accent to my son. I would prefer my son to speak English like a native speaker in the local context. My experiences as a bilingual individual have shown me that accents or dialects can sometimes cause discrimination such as teasing or bullying among children. Children might not necessarily dislike people who speak in foreign languages or accents (Cameron et al., 2001) or believe that native speakers are more intelligent or competent than non-native speakers (Kinzler & DeJesus, 2013), but speaking with an accent such as native speakers may nonetheless provide social benefits. The extent to which children can acquire English at the level of a native speaker may have significant consequences for their communicative success and feelings of social belonging later in life, and the motivation to achieve a sense of belonging is related to success at learning new languages with an appropriate accent (Ellis, 1997; Finegan, 1999; Gluszek et al., 2011).

Children's social preferences for speaking English like a native speaker could have impacts on the whole life of a bilingual person (Imuta & Spence, 2020). These accent-based preferences continue to manifest in children's friendship choices and intergroup behaviours across childhood, resulting in prejudice and discrimination in various settings in adulthood (Imuta & Spence, 2020). This trend also continues in adulthood, as studies also indicate that accents are a factor in discrimination in employment because of inappropriate concerns associated with accents, accent stereotyping, and harassment based on accents. Job recruiters typically favour a native-accented candidate over a foreign-accented counterpart, even if both have equal qualifications (Hosoda & Stone-Romero, 2010; Munro, 2003). The legal system perpetuates accent- and dialect-based discrimination by failing to provide definitive protection against it and relying on subjective measures to assess purported barriers to communication (Lippi-Green, 2011).

Considering some of the types of discrimination related to accents discussed above, I prefer my son to speak English like a native speaker. To prevent passing on my accent, I decided to speak in Persian with my son most of the time, while he can learn English in society from native speakers.

I believe children learn a language best from people who speak it well. I can be the best model for my child when I use the language I know best, but if he learns English from native people in society, he might have a better outcome. According to Flege et al. (2006), in early childhood, language learners' pronunciation of a language becomes attuned to the language-specific phonetic properties they hear most of the time. If hearing a language with a foreign accent persists, then children might never be able to develop native-like speech production.

Before he began going to childcare, I took my son to the library story times and playgroups as often as possible and checked out songs on tape so he could hear English spoken by native speakers. However, I sometimes had to speak in English with my son. For example, I read a lot of English books to my son, as I had no access to paper books in my first language. I know that reading books has many benefits for his language development. Research on literacy development is increasingly making it clear that book reading has been found to have the power to create interactional contexts that nourish language development (Dickinson et al., 2012) and is positively associated with children's later reading achievement and academic engagement (Davis-Kean & Eccles, 2003; Linver et al., 2002). Book reading is also linked to children's ability to read at a proficient level (Loera et al., 2011). Considering these benefits, I have chosen to read books to him, even though there is a risk of passing on my accent to him. However, most of our conversations are in Persian.

Code-switching

My son sometimes mixes up English and Persian words in a sentence. In other words, he uses an English word in a Persian sentence or vice versa. For example, once when he was eating breakfast, he said to me, "Mummy, more shir (a Persian word equivalent to milk) please." This also happens to me as a bilingual adult, but its frequency in my son is much higher. This makes me worried about whether learning two languages simultaneously will make him confused about which language he is speaking.

Mixing up languages is a common and normal feature of bilingual development (García, 2009; Wei, 2018). This is a common practice in bilingual speakers and is called code-switching. Like adult bilinguals, bilingual children experience code-switching (Bobb & Wodniecka, 2013; Fricke et al., 2016). Exposure to code-switching does not carry any risks and may be associated with better language outcomes in children capable of processing such input (Kaushanskaya & Crespo, 2019). There is no evidence that children learning two languages simultaneously get mixed up or confused between the two languages or that they do not know which language to use. When children demonstrate code-switching, it just means they are drawing on all the language resources they possess (Wei, 2018). Bail et al. (2015) found that code-switching was positively related to bilingual children's vocabulary size. When children use a word in the other language, it is because they do not know the word in the language they are speaking at that moment (Kaushanskaya & Crespo, 2019). Bilingual children can mix up the two languages in a sentence or conversation just like adults, but research demonstrates that they usually use the languages separately. Children can adapt according to the language spoken by the person they are interacting with and know how to distinguish between the two languages (Kaushanskaya & Crespo, 2019).

There are many reasons why children's language skills might benefit from code-switched input. Code-switching enables bilinguals to precisely express the intended meanings and circumvent lexical gaps (Green & Wei, 2014). Also, code-switched input may highlight translation equivalents (Bail et al., 2015), thus facilitating vocabulary acquisition across both languages. It may also draw children's attention to the pragmatic situations within which language input unfolds (Yow & Markman, 2016), thus enhancing the child's ability to acquire linguistic information from a communicative exchange.

Social Interaction

The other concern I have had is related to low social interaction with people, especially English speakers. Like most immigrant families, my husband and I do not have any relatives here in Canada, and we only have a group of friends, most of whom are Iranian. I think two critical factors in language development are exposure and need. If children are exposed to numerous languages in various circumstances with different people, while recognizing that they need language for communication with the world around them, they will learn it. Among environmental characteristics, the quantity and quality of children's language experiences are important predictors of children's language development (Hoff, 2018; Unsworth, 2016). Evidence of the impacts of the amount of language exposure in bilingual children studies consists of many findings that show that children who experience more social interaction develop language faster than other children (Hoff, 2006; Weisleder & Fernald, 2013). The situation of limited socializing worsened during the pandemic, when all people were self-isolated because of COVID-19. During this time, my son has been in contact only with his father and me for several months.

In addition to language development, interaction with native speakers helps my son become familiar with the culture of this country and its cultural words. I have few words for this country's cultural celebrations such as Christmas and Halloween, as we do not have the same events in my country, and they are new to me. Language differences can create conflict in communication and in the transmission of culture and identity (Anisef et al., 2001; Bernhard et al., 1996). Vygotsky's (19178) theories underline the crucial role of social interaction, and he believed that much meaningful learning by the child occurs through social interaction. Vygotsky (1962) viewed language as a person's most important tool, as it is a means for communicating with the outside world. He also believed that language develops through social interactions. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) also believe children's language development occurs through interactions between people. Language acquisition results from the learner's cognitive processes applied to the incoming speech stream while drawing information from the communicative setting in which the speech occurs (Christiansen & Chater, 2016; Tomasello, 2015).

To address this concern, I took him to playgroups, story times, and the library as much as possible. Even though these resources were not widely available as there were not a lot of such programs in the city, or at least I was not familiar with them, and their time was short (usually one hour), they were a great time for socializing and developing language. Furthermore, my friends and I also arranged playtimes, during which each of us invited the others to our house. This provided an opportunity for the children to play and socialize with each other. However, we lost this opportunity during the pandemic. I believe the pandemic period has had a lot of side effects on our children's development.

Screen Time and Language Acquisition

For immigrant parents who bring up bilingual children, one of the most difficult parts is making sure bilingual children have enough exposure to both languages. Most of the time, the language that is used more frequently than the other might seem more important to children. For example, most of my immigrant friends mentioned that their child understands that most people they come in contact with speak English, and only a few of them used their minority language when they started to go to childcare. When children notice that the minority language is used only occasionally, they might think that English is more important. Some children are susceptible to these differences and may be reluctant to use their home language, especially if other children do not use it and thus the home language may become the weaker one over time in young bilingual children (Basnight-Brown, 2014; Ebert & Kohnert, 2016). A study by Hakuta et al. (2000) illustrates that immigrant children in preschool programs often lose their home language and begin to prefer English. On the other hand, some other immigrant families who do not have a large circle of relationships with native speakers complain that their children only hear the minority language they speak at home and do not learn the majority language.

To address this problem, families need to provide enough opportunities for children to use the less-used language in a way that is not forced or artificial (Hakuta et al., 2000). In my circle of immigrant friends, I have frequently heard, especially during the pandemic and self-isolation period, that some immigrant families have increased the screen time of their child either in the majority or minority language to create an opportunity for their child to hear more from native speakers in that language and increase their exposure. However, I have tried to decrease my son's screen time, as I have heard that screen time can negatively affect children's development. I do not even have a TV at home. My son only has screen time when he is brushing his teeth. This way, I can more easily brush his teeth better and longer. My son's screen time usually is only several minutes daily.

There is a growing body of literature on the deleterious impacts of screen media on toddlers' language development (Barr et al., 2010; Byeon & Hong, 2015; Duch & et al., 2013; Linebarger & Walker, 2005). Byeon and Hong (2015) studied the relationship between the amount of young children's exposure to TV and language delays. Their study's findings revealed that the risk of language delay increases proportionately to the increase in toddlers' TV watching time. Toddlers with over two hours of TV watching time had an almost three times higher risk of a language delay than children with less than one hour of TV watching time. In another study, Duch et al. (2013) examined the association between screen media use and language development among infants and toddlers. Children who had more than two hours of screen time per day had low communication scores, and screen time was associated with lower language development. Therefore, the common belief that screen time can help language development in children is not accurate and can instead negatively impact language development.

Differences Between Children

As a mother, I have had many concerns about my child's language development. I usually ask parents about the age of their child and compare my child's language development with them, especially at the beginning of my son's language acquisition. I did not gain much insight into my

son's language development through this practice, as only it made me more aware of the vast differences between children. A critical point that parents always need to consider is the individual differences in language learning ability as well as differences in experience. Some children acquire their first words much earlier than other children (Gort, 2019). Some children develop language slower than others. This does not mean there is something wrong; in most cases, it merely means the child needs more time (Gort, 2019). There are many factors that can affect language acquisition. Gender is one characteristic of the child that is frequently found to be related to language development (Bornstein, 2013). The source of the female advantage is not exact, and it may include biological and environmental components (Bornstein et al., 2004). Girls' stronger familial ties compared to boys rather than any biological factor might explain their advancement in language development (Fenson et al., 1994; Galsworthy et al., 2000). The other factor that affects language acquisition is birth order. All other factors being equal, both monolingual and bilingual children with different birth orders have been found to have different language outcomes. In monolingual families, first-born children tend to be more advanced in vocabulary and grammatical development, whereas later-born children are more precocious in their communicative skills (Hoff, 2006). In immigrant families, first-born preschool children show stronger skills in their families' heritage language than later-born children at the same age (Bridges & Hoff, 2014).

Among environmental characteristics, the quantity and quality of children's language experience are robust predictors of children's language development. Evidence of the effects of the quantity of language exposure in studies on bilingual children consists of many findings showing that children who are exposed more develop language faster than children who are exposed less (Hoff, 2006; Weisleder & Fernald, 2013). Bornstein (2013) also identified family education level as a factor that affects language acquisition among bilingual children.

The factors mentioned above are only a few of the factors that affect language acquisition in children. Parents need to consider the differences between children and their environmental factors in language acquisition, and they need to avoid comparing children with each other. However, it is worthwhile to try to enrich children's environment as much as possible and increase bilingual children's exposure to facilitate their language acquisition.

Conclusion

In this paper, through a narrative inquiry, I shared my experiences and concerns about raising a bilingual child as an immigrant mother. The first step for immigrant parents is to decide on whether to bring up a bilingual or monolingual child considering the costs and benefits of bilingualism, as the several first years are important in children's language acquisition. Immigrant parents frequently have concerns regarding their child's language acquisition, some of which are discussed in this paper. My main concerns as an immigrant mother include language delays, code-switching, passing on my accent, limited social interactions, and using screen time for teaching language. Parents also need to consider children's inherent differences and different experiences in children's language development and prevent comparing children.

My testimonies portray deep self-reflective processes that have helped me better understand my concerns and accept the challenges I face. Sharing experiences and providing a

space to give voice allows the healing of concerns (Hooks, 2003). This narrative also advocates for a better understanding of immigrant parents' concerns in bringing up bilingual children. Through it, I invite the readers to embark on this embodied, intellectual, and writing exercise to raise awareness about being an immigrant mother.

While my stories cannot be used to generalize experiences for all immigrant parents, I hope my experiences can help immigrant parents who are raising bilingual children. Also, reflections from this narrative reveal the need for greater emphasis on community support relevant to immigrant families' children, who are often forced to grapple with negative conceptions such as low social interaction. These possibilities are the practical goal I hope to achieve in writing and sharing my testimony. As Pensoneau-Conway et al. (2014) state, in writing narratives, writers hope to enrich dialogues, relationships, and communities through the possibility of transformation and growth.

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