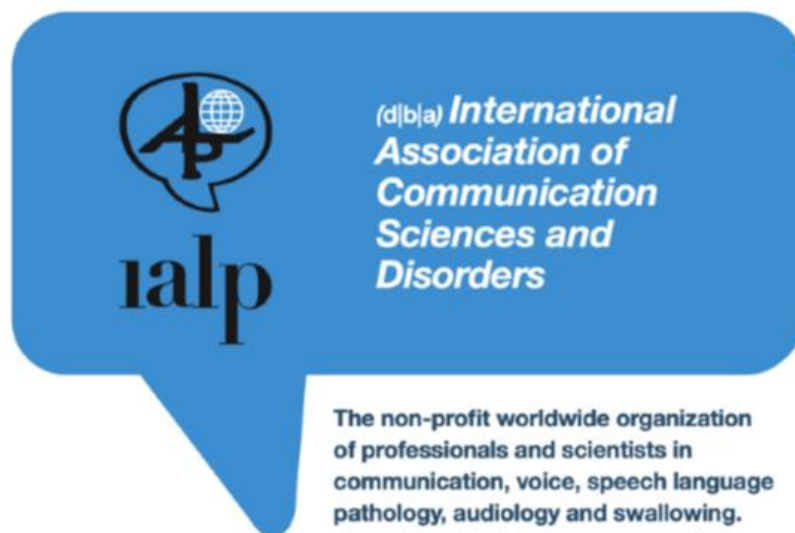# Common Questions
by Parents and Caregivers
of Bilingual / Multilingual Children and
Informed, Evidence-based Answers

Scharff Rethfeldt, W., McNeilly, L., Abutbul-Oz, H., Blumenthal, M., Garcia de Goulart, B., Hunt, E., Laasonen, M. R., Levey, S., Meir, N., Moonsamy, S., Mophosho, M., Salameh, E.-K., Smolander, S., Taiebine, M., Thordardottir, E. (2022).

The Multilingual-Multicultural Affairs Committee

(d|b|a) **International Association of Communication Sciences and Disorders**

ialp

The non-profit worldwide organization of professionals and scientists in communication, voice, speech language pathology, audiology and swallowing.

https://ialp-org.com/multilingual-multicultural-affairs/

This document is available in different languages.

Contents

We are raising our child bilingually at home, but we are worried that it may cause a delay in language development. Is delay normal in bilinguals?

Bilingual children's language development is similar to the development of children learning a single language[1]. Bilingualism itself does not cause language delay[2]. In infancy, bilingual children are sensitive to differences in languages. This indicates a very early ability for language learning. Bilingual infants begin producing their first syllables and words roughly at the same time as children learning a single language. There is also a similar pattern of learning vocabulary and grammar. However, bilingual development may often look like it is delayed because a child's total language proficiency is distributed over two languages.

If a child is learning a second language or two languages simultaneously, vocabulary development (learning words) may appear to show a delay. Indeed, when the vocabulary of each language is measured separately, it tends to be smaller than the vocabulary of a monolingual child[3]. However, when this child's vocabulary abilities are assessed in both languages, the number of words is found to be within the typical range or even larger than that of a monolingual child. Vocabulary development in any language is highly associated with the amount of input the child has received in that language[3-5].

Input affects early grammar development in a similar manner[6].

Bilingual children may be less accurate than same-age monolinguals on some grammatical aspects as compared to their monolingual peers, such as verb tense (e.g., eat/ate), verbal inflections (e.g., works, worked), plurals (e.g., book/books), or gender (e.g., he/she)[1]. In languages with rich morphology bilingual children may show differences on adjective-noun and determiner-noun agreement (e.g., in Spanish: *el conejo*), case morphology (e.g., in Russian: *slon, slona, slonu*; in German: *der Hund, dem Hund*) and aspect morphology (e.g., Russian: *pil, vypil*). These divergences from monolinguals have been attributed to cross-linguistic influence, the influence from one language on the other language and/or vice versa[7-9]. These differences are not signs of a learning difficulty, but are due to having less exposure and/or practice using these grammatical forms.

Many times, exposure is uneven, and bilinguals vary from each other especially in terms of language production. Additionally, children – and adults – often exhibit uneven proficiency across their two languages. Children and adults vary in whether their heritage language or the community language is stronger, and this can change over time.

The amount of linguistic input influences language competence, parents raising bilingual children should provide adequate support to heritage languages (also referred to as "minority language", "community language", "home language", "family language", "mother tongue", "L1"), because the child may not receive much input in that language in other settings[10]. In addition, it is important that parents understand that assessment of a child's vocabulary and grammar should ideally assess all languages involved, including the heritage language(s). For example, if a child is

assessed in only one language, this will not show the true size of the child's vocabulary knowledge.

We are bilingual parents, but are considering raising our child monolingually at home, using only the societal (majority) language. However, we speak the societal language with a strong accent (e.g. due to migration) and are more proficient in our heritage language. Is this a good idea?

Children who are exposed to two languages from birth typically become proficient in both languages, provided they receive abundant and continuous exposure to both. In addition, children who later learn the societal or majority language at school are likely to learn that language and to succeed in school when they have a strong base in their first language(s) and adequate support and exposure to the majority language.

For bilingual language learners, language development depends on the quality and quantity of social interaction with speakers of both/all languages involved[4,6,11,12]. Quality means that the language spoken must be spoken with accuracy, ease, and fluency. The quantity factor is provided when the parents provide children with frequent interactions in the language(s) they speak with the child with fluency and ease. Given that bilingual parents have a good command of their heritage language, they are best able to provide children with these quality factors in that language. Parents speaking a language other than their heritage language at home do not yield better results in the child's second language learning, however, this does affect retention of their heritage language[13].

Some bilingual children are exposed to two languages within their home, and some are exposed to one language at home, and the societal language in a daycare or preschool setting. In the preschool years, the amount of exposure to each language has been found to exert a far greater influence on the acquisition of each language than how old the child is when bilingual exposure starts[12,14]. This gives parents flexibility in terms of when to introduce a second language, such as in a daycare or preschool setting. Parents who talk with children about their past experiences, using their heritage languages, help their children connect with the parents' culture. Stories also provide children with understanding of narratives (stories), which are an important skill in early academic development.

Retention of the first language (L1) can be challenging without sufficient exposure, and shift in language dominance can be rather rapid, even with a heritage language with high status[15]. Maintaining the heritage language is even more challenging in minority language environments, when the language has few speakers and low status in the society. Keeping a minority language in use involves special effort. Sometimes children's heritage language may be lost[16], a process known as language attrition. This process can occur when children are isolated from, or not exposed to, their heritage language. This attrition can also happen at varying degrees, depending on the opportunities and motivation to use the language.

When should I seek professional help if my bilingual child does not speak, or shows performance which is low for his age when compared to his bilingual peers?

You should seek help as soon as possible if you feel your child is struggling with speech and/or language, compared to what you would have expected when compared to other children developing in a similar language environment.

However, keep in mind that young bilingual children can look delayed because each of their languages represents only part of their language knowledge.

A language disorder must appear in both languages to determine a true disorder. Difficulties can, however, vary in their severity between the languages. They can also manifest themselves differently in different languages and language domains. Assessment must consider all languages that a child has learned or is in the process of learning. If concerns are present, seek professional help. If difficulties appear only in the second language being learned, this does not necessarily indicate a disorder. However, if communicative difficulties in either language persist for a long time, some type of support may be necessary.

My child is three years old and we have been raising him bilingually at home. We try to follow the 'one-parent-one-language' (OPOL) rule, but we have noticed that our son mixes the two languages together when he speaks. Is this a sign that he has a language disorder?

When each parent has a different heritage language, a one-parent-one language strategy can be a good option to ensure that the child gets the desired amount of exposure to each language. However, it is not necessary that parents separate the two languages for the child to learn.

Raising a child according to the OPOL principle does involve great and often demanding efforts, as societal influences may work against caregivers' interests and ability to raise actively bilingual children[17]. Overall, the OPOL strategy does not guarantee balanced bilingualism[18,19]. There is high variation among factors that affect language use by families[20]. In some migrant families, maximal engagement with the heritage language may be more successful than the OPOL principle[21].

Code switching occurs when bilingual speakers combine words or phrases from both languages spoken. This is not a sign of a language delay. Instead, this is part of the typical development of bilingual speakers and a natural part of bilingualism for both children and adults[22]. Bilingual children can achieve separation of their two languages, but whether they do depends on their language dominance and on the bilingual speech patterns of the greater community[23,24].

Code switching may occur for several reasons[25]. First, a word may not be currently accessible or pulled from memory to communicate a thought or idea. Second, children may use code switching to ask an adult for help in finding a correct word to label something or express an idea. Third, code switching (including mixing) is used to produce longer and more complex sentences by bilingual speaking children. Code switching has a positive aspect, as it shows that a bilingual child has the ability to use words from both/all languages being learned.

We are bilingual parents and mix the two languages (code switch) very often. Is it okay to speak both languages to the child and code switch?

Code switching is a typical pattern for both bilingual children and adults and is not a disorder. In many cases, both parents may be bilingual and may themselves code-switch when talking to each other or to the child. This does not harm the child's learning. It might however be challenging for a little child in the process of acquiring language if parents do a lot of mixing within sentences[26].

Code switching is not used solely for lexical deficiencies, but for pragmatic, social and cultural reasons. Adults use code switching to enrich conversations and interactions. It is a valuable tool that may allow a bilingual family to make their conversations richer and more understandable. Frequently, children will follow the patterns spoken by adults in their environment.

At what age should we expose our child to a second language? Should we wait until our child gets control of the home language first, or should we start as early as possible?

Evidence shows that young learners may acquire high levels of mastery of a second language given continued regular exposure to both languages, depending on the input, language preference and dominance, changes in dominance, attitudes etc. By age 4, children become more aware of the language to be used in interaction[1]. A positive aspect of early learning of another language is that it gives the child more time for practicing the language. There is some evidence, that for some language domains, it might be beneficial to start as early as possible. On the other hand, some domains might develop faster at an older age, and so the introduction of another language (L2) at a later age may help retention of the earlier language(s) (L1), depending on the circumstances[27]. Sensitive periods for learning language domains, have been found[28]. In the educational domain, better learning occurs early for L2 phonology (speech sounds), later for lexis and collocation (the lexicon of a language or vocabulary and the arrangement of grammatical terms in a sentence), and morphosyntax in the mid-teen period of learning. Additionally, the timing of

introducing a second language often varies dependent on when it occurs (e.g., movement to another country or entry into school).

Within the preschool years, the amount of exposure is far more important than the age of first bilingual exposure[12,14]. Therefore, parents have considerable flexibility in their choices as to when to start exposing their child to a second/another language.

Which language should I use with my child if the language spoken in the school is different from the one spoken at home? Should we drop the home language and use only one language? What would happen if we, the parents, drop the home language, but the grandparents continue to use it with the child?

Maintaining a child's native language while being educated in the school language is positive for many reasons. The most obvious one is knowledge of more languages and ability to communicate with the heritage language community. Parents vary in how important it is to them to keep their heritage language. It is important for parents to understand that continuing to speak the heritage language will not hurt the child's ability to learn the societal language. It is essential to encourage a family to communicate in their heritage language(s) to preserve their culture and the child's bilingual or multilingual skills. This will allow the child to understand and speak the family's language, as well as understand and participate in the family's culture and community. Many times, preserving the heritage language(s) is also essential to parent-child and family-child dialogue.

There are a few suggested approaches for language use for the family. For example, the 'One Person – One-Language' (OPOL) policy applies to families where each parent speaks a different language. This approach describes each parent consistently speaking their own heritage language to the child. For example, if one parent's heritage language is Italian and the other's language is French, each parent would use that language exclusively in direct communication with their child. The OPOL strategy is based on a monolingual norm, as it is mostly used by parents who themselves did not have first-hand personal experience growing up bilingually[29]. However, the most important message is that parents engage in meaningful interactions and feel comfortable talking as much as possible with their child. This may require them to be flexible, to suit the family's circumstances, to accept the choices of the child, and accept a later possible gradual decline in the use of OPOL in favor of an increase in mixing languages in the home. Also, it might be possible that the language used by the grandparents becomes a heritage language for the children not actively hearing and using it in their lives, leading to lower levels of proficiency.

The "Minority Language at Home" approach applies to families in which both parents speak the same language or are proficient enough to use the minority language to provide more support for that language. Both parents will speak the minority language at home with their child. For example, if one parent's heritage language is

Arabic and the other parent is proficient in Arabic as well (even if his/her heritage language was something else), Arabic would be the language that would be used to communicate at home with their child. Maybe only the grandparents will continue to speak the heritage language. With time, many families find use of the societal language within the home increasing as all family members live daily experiences in that language.

If parents wish their children to be able to communicate in all of their languages, children need to hear and use those languages substantially in their everyday lives and in diverse situations. The number of different speakers offering input may be important, depending on the languages and language environments in which the child lives[13]. Outside experiences are essential, such as the playground and playgroups, so that children gain additional experience with both of their languages, when meeting other children.

Our five-year-old is bilingual and has been diagnosed with a developmental language disorder. We have been advised to speak only one language to him at home — the language spoken at school. This will be difficult, since his older sister and brother speak two languages and we are a bilingual family. Should we follow this advice?

This advice comes from the incorrect belief that learning two languages is beyond the capacity of children with language or learning disorders. Research provides no evidence that children with language disorders cannot become bilingual. Previous research shows that bilingualism does not impede language development in children with a language disorder such as DLD[30-33]; children with ASD[34-38]; children with Down Syndrome[39]; children with William Syndrome[40]; and children with Hearing Impairment[41].

DLD and bilingualism both may slow language development. Bilingual children may be behind monolingual peers at some points in development.

Children with DLD especially require sufficient support to be successful in a bilingual situation[42].

Rather than discontinuing the home language, which would deprive the child of the ability to develop that language, parents are advised to continue to use their heritage language with the child. Parents are advised to provide abundant experiences in that language with interactive reading or other language activities. Parents are also advised to support comprehension and communication in similar ways as done with monolinguals (using visual aids, e.g. signs and pictures, while simultaneously offering verbal input).

We planned for our son to attend an immersion school where he can learn through a second language – different from the language we speak at home – and grow up bilingually. But our son has been diagnosed with a developmental language disorder. Does this mean he is not a good candidate for immersion education?

Children who have speech and language disorders are able to acquire two languages. As stated above, studies have shown that many children with a (developmental) language disorder have no greater difficulty learning a second language than they have in learning one, given frequent exposure to this language. Research shows that English-speaking children with language delay in French immersion schools in Canada had similar academic achievements with English-speaking children with a delay in English-only schools[42]. These findings show that learning through a second language did not affect the children's academic success. In this case, however, one of the languages spoken at school is also the home language. Findings on academic success are somewhat mixed in some immigrant environments[43]. In any case, it is essential to ensure that the school provides the support necessary for children's academic progress and success, with more frequent language interaction in the school language and support with learning difficulties.

My daughter is fluent in her home language but finds it difficult to acquire the school language. Could there be a delay (impairment) in the second language only?

The average second-language learner may require two years to acquire Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS). This type of learning occurs in interactive conversation in which the situation's context is provided, as well as non-verbal cues to support verbal language[44].

Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) refers to academic language. It may take children five to seven years or longer to achieve language consistent with the level needed for academic success[43-46]. It is not uncommon for children to have difficulty with CALP, as difficulties may appear in reading, writing, spelling, and other academic areas. Awareness of the normal progress in learning a second language is necessary to determine if there is a true disorder. If CALP skills are taking longer to develop, some type of tutoring or special education may be required to ensure that the child benefits from school.

References

[1] Paradis, J. (2010). The interface between bilingual development and specific language impairment. Applied Psycholinguistics, 31(2), 227-252.

[2] Lowry, L. (2018). Bilingualism in young children: separating fact from fiction. Hanen Center. Separating-Fact-fr.aspx.

[3] Hoff, E., Core, C., Place, S., Rumiche, R., Senor, M., & Parra, M. (2012). Dual language exposure and early bilingual development. *Journal of Child Language, 39*, 1-27.

[4] Thordardottir, E. (2011). The relationship between bilingual exposure and vocabulary development. *International Journal of Bilingualism, 14*(5), 426-445., DOI: 10.1177/1367006911403202

[5] Pearson, B. (2007). Social factors in childhood bilingualism in the United States. *Applied Psycholinguistics, 28*, 399-410.

[6] Thordardottir, E. (2015). The relationship between bilingual exposure and morphosyntactic development. *International Journal of Speech Language Pathology, 17*(2), 97-114.

[7] Cuza, A., & Pérez-Tattam, R. (2016). Grammatical gender selection and phrasal word order in child heritage Spanish: A feature re-assembly approach. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition, 19*(1), 50-68.

[8] Scharff Rethfeldt, W. (2011). Morphologische Fähigkeiten am Beispiel der deutschen Pluralbildung bei mehrsprachigen Kindern. *LOGOS, 19*, 1, 38-44.

[9] Meir, N. & Walters, J. & Armon-Lotem, S. (2016). Bi-directional cross-linguistic influence in bilingual Russian-Hebrew children. Linguistic Approaches to Bilingualism. 7.

[10] Mieszkowska, K., Łuniewska, M., Kołak, J., Kacprzak, A., Wodniecka, Z., & Haman, E. (2017). Home language will not take care of itself: Vocabulary knowledge in trilingual children in the United Kingdom. *Frontiers in Psychology, 8*, 135811

[11] Hoff, E. & Core, C. (2013). Input and language development in bilingually developing children. *Seminars in Speech and Language, 34*(4), 215-226.

[12] Thordardottir, E. (2019). Amount trumps timing in bilingual vocabulary acquisition: Effect of input in simultaneous and sequential school-age bilinguals. *International Journal of Bilingualism, 23*(1), 236-255.

[13] Place, S., & Hoff, E. (2011). Properties of dual language exposure that influence 2-year-olds' bilingual proficiency. *Child Development*, *82*, 1834-1849.

[14] Unsworth, S. (2016). Early child L2 acquisition: Age or input effects? Neither, or both? *Journal of child language, 43*(3), 608-63415 Scheidnes, M., & Tuller, L. (2016). Assessing successive bilinguals in two languages: A longitudinal look at English-speaking children in France. *Journal of Communication Disorders*, *64*, 45-61.

[15] Scheidnes, M., & Tuller, L. (2016). Assessing successive bilinguals in two languages: A longitudinal look at English-speaking children in France. *Journal of Communication Disorders*, *64*, 45-61.

[16] Polinsky, M. and Kagan, O. (2007), Heritage Languages: In the 'Wild' and in the Classroom. Language and Linguistics Compass, 1: 368-395

[17] Hammer, C. S., Miccio, A. W., & Rodriguez, B. L. (2004). Bilingual language acquisition and the child socialization process. In B. A. Goldstein (Ed.), *Bilingual language development and disorders in Spanish-English speakers* (pp. 21–50). Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.

[18] De Houwer, A. (2005). Early bilingual acquisition: Focus on morphosyntax and the Separate Development Hypothesis. In J. Kroll & A. de Groot (Eds.), *Handbook of bilingualism: Psycholinguistic approaches* (pp. 30-48). New York: Oxford University Press.

[19] De Houwer, A. (2007). Parental language input patterns and children's bilingual use. *Applied Psycholinguistics, 28*(3), 411-424.

[20] Yamamoto, M. (2001). *Language Use in Interlingual Families: A Japanese-English Socio- linguistic Study.* Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

[21] Marinova-Todd, S., Bradford Marshall, D. & Snow, C.E. (2000). Three misconceptions about age and L2 learning. *TESOL Quarterly*, *34*(1), 9-34.

[22] Brice, A. & Roseberry-McKibbin, C. (2001). Choice of languages in instruction: One language or two. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 33(4), 10-16.

[23] Paradis, J., & Nicoladis, E. (2007). The influence of dominance and sociolinguistic context on bilingual preschoolers' language choice. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, 10*(3), 277-297.

[24] Iluz-Cohen, P., & Walters, J. (2012). Telling stories in two languages: Narratives of bilingual preschool children with typical and impaired language. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition, 15*(1), 58-74.

[25] Scharff Rethfeldt, W. (2013). *Grundlagen und Praxis der sprachtherapeutischen Intervention*. Stuttgart: Thieme Publishers.

[26] Byers-Henlein, K. 2013. Parental language mixing: Its measurement and the relation of mixed input to young bilingual children's vocabulary size. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition, 16*, 32-4825

[27] Blom, E., & Bosma, E. (2016). The sooner the better? An investigation into the role of age of onset and its relation with transfer and exposure in bilingual Frisian–Dutch children. *Journal of Child Language, 43*(3), 581-607.

[28] Granena, G. & Long, M. H. (eds.), *Sensitive periods, language aptitude, and ultimate L2 attainment*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

[29] Palviainen, A., & Boyd S. (2013). Unity in Discourse, Diversity in Practice: The One Person One Language Policy in Bilingual Families. In M. Schwartz, & A. Verschik (eds.): *Successful Family Language Policy: Parents, Children and Educators in Interaction, Multilingual Education 7*. Dordrecht: Springer.

[30] Armon-Lotem, S., & Meir, N. (2016). Diagnostic accuracy of repetition tasks for the identification of specific language impairment (SLI) in bilingual children: evidence from Russian and Hebrew. *International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders, 51*(6), 715-731.

[31] Gutiérrez-Clellen, V. F., Simon-Cereijido, G., & Wagner, C. (2008). Bilingual children with language impairment: A comparison with monolinguals and second language learners. A*pplied Psycholinguistics, 29*(1), 3-19.

[32] Morgan, G. P., Restrepo, M. A., & Auza, A. (2013). Comparison of Spanish morphology in monolingual and Spanish–English bilingual children with and without language impairment. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition, 16*(3), 578-596.

[33] Paradis, J., Crago, M., Genesee, F., & Rice, M. (2003). French-English Bilingual Children With SLI. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research, 46*(1), 113-127.

[34] Gonzalez-Barrero, A. M., & Nadig, A. (2018). Bilingual children with autism spectrum disorders: The impact of amount of language exposure on vocabulary and morphological skills at school age. *Autism Research, 11*(12), 1667-1678.

[35] Hambly, C., & Fombonne, E. (2012). The impact of bilingual environments on language development in children with autism spectrum disorders. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 42*(7), 1342-1352.

[36] Kay-Raining Bird, E., Lamond, E., & Holden, J. (2012). Survey of bilingualism in autism spectrum disorders. *International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders, 47*(1), 52-64.

[37] Meir, N. & Novogrodsky. R. (2019a). Syntactic abilities and verbal memory in monolingual and bilingual children with High Functioning Autism (HFA). First Language. Retrieved from https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0142723719849981

[38] Meir, N. & Novogrodsky. R. (2019b). Prerequisites of pronoun use in monolingual and bilingual children with High Functioning Autism (HFA) and typical language development. *Frontiers in Psychology*. Retrieved from https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02289/full

[39] Kay-Raining Bird, E., Cleave, P., Trudeau, N., Thordardottir, E., Sutton, A., & Thorpe, A. (2005). The language abilities of bilingual children with Down Syndrome. *American Journal of Speech Language Pathology, 14*, 187-199.

[40] Perovic, A., & Lochet, S., (2015). G*rammatical morphology in bilingual Williams syndrome: A single case study*. A poster presented at bi-SLI 2015 conference, François-Rabelais University, Tours: France.

[41] Bunta, F., Douglas, M., Dickson, H., Cantu, A., Wickesberg, J., & Gifford, R. H. (2016). Dual language versus English-only support for bilingual children with hearing loss who use cochlear implants and hearing aids. *International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders, 51*(4), 460-472.

[42] Paradis, J., Govindarajan, K., & Hernandez, K. (2018). Bilingual Development in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder from Newcomer Families. Available at https://era.library.ualberta.ca/items/d53d7b1b-c4d6-4d2f-a595-3ac2ecd8a52c/view/229ca8a8- b060-473d-89a5-93cfc7b9e652/Bilingual-20ASD_FINAL_SummaryReport_05MAR2018.pdf.

[43] Thordardottir, Elin. (2017). Are background variables good predictors of need for L2 assistance in school? Effects of age, L1, amount, and timing of exposure on Icelandic language and nonword repetition scores. International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism. 23. 1-23. 10.1080/13670050.2017.1358695.

[44] Cummins, J. (1991). Conversational and academic language proficiency in bilingual contexts. In J. H. Hulstijn & J. F. Matter (Eds.), *Reading in Two Languages. AILA-Review 8/91* (pp. 75-89).

[45] Baker, C. (2011). Foundations of bilingual education and bilingualism. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

[46] Vogl, L. (2013). Tips for assessing bilingual children as a monolingual SLP, ASHA Leader. Available at https://blog.asha.org/2013/11/26/leisha-vogle-assessing-bilingual-children-as-a- monolingual-slp/.