

"No English in this house!": Challenges and advantages of bilingualism at the home

Contributed by Amel S. Abdullah

Maria T. was only a baby when she immigrated to New York from Italy at the end of World War II.

Her parents spoke Italian with her and preserved Italian cultural traditions at home, maintaining their way of life in a predominantly Italian neighborhood where residents shared their heritage and experiences..

By the time she was in first grade, however, Maria knew there was a stigma attached to being "foreign" in America. Kids laughed at her accent and made racial slurs. She pressured her own mother to learn English and worked hard to integrate. Today, Maria's grown children only speak a few words of Italian, while her grandchildren speak no Italian at all.

The family's story is typical of what countless immigrants experience as they strive to assimilate into a majority culture. Sociologists say it can take between three to seven generations for full assimilation to take place, and language is one of the first things to go. Often, the importance of speaking the dominant "language of power," which is needed to succeed in a particular society, is stressed to children.

In today's climate of ethnic diversity and multicultural pride (the 2000 US census reports that nearly one in five Americans speaks a language other than English at home), raising children to speak more than one language is no longer stigmatized in most educated circles. Rather, parents who can afford it are enrolling their children in special classes and language immersion programs in record numbers, buying books, tapes, videos, CDs and other materials to enhance their learning experience, and spending time overseas to get practical use of their target language.

Learning Arabic is a Key to Religious Knowledge

For Sarah* and her Syrian husband Ali,* residents of Orange County who have lived in Amman, Jordan since 2003, that target language is Arabic. "I think Arabic is a must for Muslims because it is the language of our holy book, and correct understanding of the Qur'an is incomplete without this knowledge," Sarah, an American of European heritage who embraced Islam in 1995, told InFocus. Her three children, ages 5, 7 and 9, attend school in Jordan and are fluent in both Arabic and English.

Munira Jones,* another resident of Orange County who lived in Amman and embraced Islam in 1981, said there are too many kids who grow up in America with "no clue about Arabic," even when both parents are Arabs. "They should be proud of the fact that they speak more than one language, and especially the language of the Qur'an and Jannah (Heaven)," she said. A mother of nine bilingual children ranging in age from 4 to 23, Munira, an American of British and German descent, and her Palestinian husband spoke primarily Arabic to their children while living in the States.

"In America, we were not allowed to speak English at home," said Munira's daughter Khadijah,* who is 20 and a fourth-year architectural engineering student at the University of Jordan. "I took classes in Arabic and Qur'an when I was growing up. We had an Arabic satellite, which meant that we only watched Arabic TV. If we spoke English at home, we had to repeat what we said like ten times. There was always someone going around telling us to speak in Arabic."

According to Dr. H el ene Knoerr, an associate professor specializing in linguistics applied to second language teaching at the University of Ottawa's Second Language Institute in Ontario, Canada, "Early immersion in the second language is the best and most effective way" to ensure children are bilingual. Dr. Knoerr and her husband (both of whom are French) speak French to their four children and send them to a French school. "But the neighborhood is English-speaking and our children's friends speak English, so our children learned English with their friends through

games and play," she explained.

Bilingual Children Have Cognitive Advantages

"The best research shows that [bilingualism] helps children by giving them two sets of cognitive 'frames' — that is, two ways of describing or knowing things," said Dr. April Linton, an assistant professor of sociology at UC San Diego who specializes in political sociology and immigration.

"The brain of early bilinguals has more gray matter than the brain of monolinguals," added Dr. Knoerr. "Also, the executive functions of the brain are more active in bilingual people because they act as a switch between languages."

Tahir Anwar, who is the imam (leader) and director of religious services at the South Bay Islamic Association in San Jose, California, speaks, reads and writes a total of five languages: English, Gujarati, Urdu, Arabic and Hindi.

"The brain is an amazing organ, and three languages are no more trying than one if kept in order - there is actually room to spare!" commented Tracey Noel Tokuhama-Espinosa, a professor of education at the Universidad San Francisco de Quito in Quito, Ecuador who holds a Master's degree in education from Harvard University and is currently working on a PhD in neuro-education (brain-based learning). "To top it off, the more languages you learn, the easier it becomes to learn an additional one."

"Knowing more than one language expands the horizon of the mind to more than one culture and way of thinking," said Edgard Sammour, a native of Lebanon and resident of San Jose who immigrated to America in 1995 and embraced Islam five years later. Edgard, who is 32, attended French-language schools in Lebanon and is fluent in Arabic, French and English. "It's very important that my future children are bilingual, insha'Allah (God willing), [and proficient] in Arabic [so they will] have a strong link to the Qur'an and the Arabic heritage. I would definitely be disappointed if they stuck to just one language."

Imam Tahir said he is a "believer in knowing more than one language" and speaks primarily Gujarati to his wife and two sons, ages 5 and three 3 months. "It's always good to know more than one language," he said, especially when it comes to work and communicating with family back home.

Birth to Nine Months: The First Window of Opportunity

In her book *Raising Multilingual Children: Language Acquisition and Children* (2001), Tokuhama-Espinosa writes about certain windows of opportunity during which learning a second language comes most naturally for children, the first of which starts at birth.

"Neurological studies of babies show that we are all born with universal receivers of language sounds," explained Tokuhama-Espinosa, a native of California whose three children, ages 9, 11 and 14, attend German school and speak English, Spanish, German and French. "That is, up until about 7-9 months of age, babies have different electrical firings in the brain for each sound, independent of the language. After that time, babies begin to become selective and only recognize the sounds that are in their environment. For this reason, people brought up bilingual from birth have no accents. Additionally, studies have shown that the auditory cortex narrows between two-and-a-half and three-and-a-half years old, meaning both the brain and the physical ear become more and more limited as we grow older."

This is in line with what Munira has observed in her own children. "The most important thing I feel is that [an Arab] father must speak Arabic to his children from infancy," she commented. "Arabic has more guttural [sounds] than English, [and] the letters that are difficult for us as adults learning Arabic come naturally for children."

Four to Eight Years: The Second Window of Opportunity

Tokuhama-Espinosa says a second window of opportunity exists at between four and eight years old, but it has to do with "psychology" – not neurology or physiology. "Small children have small egos and treat language as a game," she said.

Aida Nunez, a native of Mexico who lives in Tustin, California with her husband Moeen, a native of Pakistan, is raising her two children to speak English, Spanish and Urdu. At age 7, her daughter Sumayyah has already realized the social benefits of speaking multiple languages. "It is easy [for her] to make friends in any of the three languages she speaks," said Aida, who believes speaking so many languages has increased Sumayyah's self esteem. "She has the ability to be close to my side of the family, [which is] mostly Spanish speaking. She also shares a strong bond with her paternal grandparents, and we can tell that she is totally comfortable in any of the three environments."

While it is possible to learn a language at any point in life (and Tokuhama-Espinosa notes that adults are actually more efficient at it than children when they put in the same amount of time and effort), there are definite advantages to starting early. "It is commonly accepted that puberty marks the end of the ‘critical period’ - or the age at which languages can be acquired and spoken as native languages – that is, without effort and without a ‘foreign’ accent in the case of second (non native) languages," said Dr. Knoerr.

Use it or Lose It

Most parents we spoke to agreed that being consistent is the most important factor in raising children to speak multiple languages. "Resistance has come from time to time, but this only happened when we stopped paying attention to Urdu and Spanish and began to rely more heavily on English for everyday conversation," said Aida. "Now that we have our rhythm back, the resistance has stopped, and the reception and output of the other languages has improved with both our children."

Children should not be forced or punished to speak a second language, said Dr. Linton. "If the child answers the parent in English, the parent should comprehend but continue to speak in the target language," she advised. "This is a phase that a lot of kids go through, but when they get older, they’ll be grateful for their bilingualism."

Anna Lin, an American of Chinese heritage who embraced Islam in 1997 and lives in San Jose with her Jordanian-born husband and two boys, ages 5 and 8, is fluent in English and speaks conversational Arabic, but says that Arabic has been on the decline in her home as of late. "We spoke proper Arabic in the early years - we taught them the Arabic letters and basic reading as well," said Anna, who has also considered teaching her children Japanese, which she picked up from her linguist-father as a child. "Nowadays, my struggle is against all their peers, both Muslim and non, who speak primarily English. Everything was great until English started to overtake our lives."

"There is no one-size-fits-all strategy for families," said Tokuhama-Espinosa. "Parents must also remember that each individual is unique and that what they plan for one child may not serve the second, and they must be flexible in the strategies they adopt."

"It takes a definite concerted effort by both parents to raise bilingual kids," added Sarah. "Both parents have to agree and make the effort."

* Some names have been changed to protect privacy.