Identity Building and Developing Linguistic Bilingualism

Building a Francophone Identity

Redistributing Linguistic Capital

At five years of age, the unilingual child has already acquired approximately 22,000 hours of linguistic experience, at 12 hours per day, 84 hours per week. Imagine that these hours represent capital deposited in a savings account. The bilingual child has the same capital, but it is shared between two accounts.

With two francophone parents, the French account grows more quickly than the English account at first, but the English account, opened at birth, also continues to grow, even if only when the child is outside the home.

With only one francophone parent, deposits to the French account are smaller—with luck, a few hours (dollars) per day. Since the language of communication in the home is usually English, it becomes practically natural to speak English to the child after a conversation with the spouse—especially if the spouse is present. Therefore, the francophone adult has to make an effort to adopt other linguistic habits at home and reserve moments to speak to the child exclusively in French.

In both cases, the child may very well still choose to communicate exclusively in English, while understanding French perfectly. This is known as passive bilingualism. Hence, the importance of an interesting, fun, enriching learning environment at all times. This encourages the child to develop an emotional attachment to French and make the use of French more relevant, which contributes to identity building. To resume the bank account metaphor, this increases the account balance.

Fortunately, numerous resources are available to assist francophone parents. The most recent is GRANDIR CBMC, a French-language adaptation of the LEAPBC™ program from the British Columbia organization, 2010 Legacies Now, in partnership with the four francophone parent federations of Western Canada and several territorial partners.

GRANDIR CBMC Program

Recently, many of the LEAPBC™ resources have been adapted to French in an effort to support parents and early learning professionals. The program includes a guide, Pistes d’épanouissement pour les petits (PEP), and 40 activity sheets on literacy, physical activity and healthy diet. A guide to healthy eating, Manger santé, will be available soon. With its guiding philosophy, so well expressed by its title, GRANDIR (guider, raconter, apprendre, nourrir, découvrir, imaginer et rire)*, the program content builds on a child’s natural craving for active learning.

GRANDIR CBMC resources are available through our website at www.fpfcb.bc.ca ».

Of all the elements involved in identity building for preschoolers, language development plays a central role. The decisions that minority francophone parents make will have significant impact on their children’s sense of identity and belonging as francophones. Indeed, (at that age) the children are going through the phases of developing linguistic bilingualism and their skill in understanding French varies enormously. To help these children to build their francophone identity and acquire strong bilingual skills, we must maximize their exposure to French by associating the language with interesting, fun, enriching experiences.

* GRANDIR (guide, recount, learn, nourish, discover, imagine, laugh); in English, LEAPBC™ (literacy, education, activity, and play)
Developing Linguistic Bilingualism

In 2007, the Fédération des parents francophones de Colombie-Britannique (FPFCB) invited me to conduct workshops for the parents of francophone preschoolers in the province. This trial program proved to be extremely worthwhile, since literature regarding the linguistic development of preschoolers in a bilingual environment is very scarce***.

But the linguist that I am, armed with theoretical and practical knowledge gleaned from research into language acquisition among bilingual preschoolers, usually learn even more from the parents attending the workshops. Experiences and methods vary, but the basic questions remain the same:

1. At what age should a preschooler be exposed to both languages? Would it be better to focus first on English, the language needed for survival?
2. Does bilingualism slow the child’s linguistic development?
3. Should we be concerned when the preschooler combines the two languages? For example, Mai va Rec Centre.

My response:

1. The best way to ensure bilingualism is to begin at birth. Language acquisition is optimum up to the age of seven (some experts suggest age four). There is no need to focus on English, not only because the environment promotes English, but because you will miss out on the optimum years for linguistic development, the period when preschoolers are like sponges, soaking it all in indiscriminately. Moreover, in a minority environment, we need to “compensate” for the less frequently used language, therefore maximizing French. This will be the topic of my next article.
2. The pace of linguistic development of unilingual and bilingual preschoolers is essentially identical; however, the bilingual child must assimilate more information, since he is learning two linguistic systems, i.e., the 36 French sounds versus the 44 English sounds; two vocabulary systems (chat, cat; pain, main, bain and rub-a-dub-dub); and sentence structure (Mon chat noir versus My black cat). Before becoming bilingual, the preschooler “combines” the two languages. This may give the impression that language development is delayed or that the child is confused. In reality, the child is in the process of WORKING HARD to analyze and differentiate all of this information. By the way, the bilingual child has a significant advantage, since he learns to concentrate and analyze at a very young age.
3. It is NORMAL to confuse languages during the early childhood bilingual development. In fact, it proves that the child is becoming bilingual. Before the age of seven, mix-ups are generally associated with the acquisition of vocabulary. Of course, the amount of exposure to both languages must also be taken into account. For a reminder of the “bank account” concept of 22,000 linguistic dollars, please re-read the first article in this series! See the article in February 2011.

***By popular demand, these workshops are now offered yearly, thanks to a partnership between the FPFCB and Réso-Santé Colombie-Britannique.

Two Languages, One Child

A child may be aware that he is speaking two languages as early as age two (more often at about age three). Usually, she first notices that she is speaking to people in different ways (using different expressions and vocabulary). Next, begins a major effort to analyze and differentiate (jus in French, juice in English).
Promoting French for Daily Living
Identity Building and Developing Linguistic Bilingualism

This is the third in a series of four articles on identity building and the development of linguistic bilingualism by author/linguist Annie Bourret.

Routine (an activity that is regular and predictable, such as reading a book every evening, brushing the child’s teeth, preparing a lunch box to take to daycare) gives the child a feeling of emotional security and enhances an appreciation of French by making it part of his or her regular activities.

Rejoicing (a game or activity that the child loves to do, like watching DVDs, singing, playing hide and seek, and reading) strengthens family ties, makes for wonderful memories and enhances an appreciation of French by giving it a socio-emotive dimension. The element of play also helps build the child’s knowledge of French by introducing him or her to new situations (¡So, let’s pretend that you are the cashier at the supermarket and I am your customer, ok?¡).

Repetition (the linguistic «content» of an activity, for example singing «Frère Jacques» until the child knows the words and the melody, or reading the same story over and over again) provides a solid anchor for language learning while putting the child at ease.

Rewarding is what gives the child a sense of confidence and competency. By letting the child experience activities in an encouraging atmosphere (Good for you!, I am proud of you!, That’s great!), the child associates French with a pleasant experience that builds self-esteem and that the child will want to repeat.

In multicultural families, it is particularly important to create time and space to communicate only in French. For example, sing a song in French on the way to daycare. There is nothing to stop the non-francophone parent from joining in.

It is essential to display a positive attitude, since this helps to reinforce the child’s sense of security and awareness of the relevance of French. (So, what did you do today at the French play-group? Way to go!) The goal is to learn French; this is the ultimate confirmation of the importance that the non-francophone parent places on this language. This also allows the child to play the role of expert. Lastly, reading to the child is important, even if it’s not in French, since reading skills can be transferred from one language to another.

What if your child refuses to speak French? Don’t be discouraged. This is normal. Your child is demonstrating independence. He is aware that English is dominant in his environment and it requires the least amount of effort.

If you have followed the four Rs*, adopt an attitude of encouragement or negotiate. (I love to hear you speak French. Can we speak French when we’re in the car?) Keep in mind that your child is learning to speak two languages at the same time. His vocabulary is shared between the two languages and mirrors his reality. He may say Rec Centre, but he will understand Centre de loisirs, especially if you teach him. (That is in English. In French, we say…) Lastly, it is preferable to lead by example than to impose French. If the child notices that you are having fun in French, he will be more inclined to imitate your behaviour. The next article, the last in the series, will discuss reading.

* The four Rs are listed on page 18 of Pistes d’épanouissement pour les petits (PEP), GRANDIR CB. The English version (routine, rejoicing, repetition and rewarding) appears on page 19 of the same reference.
By adopting the philosophy of the four Rs to encourage the use of French (routine, repetition, rewarding, rejoicing) when reading to your youngster, you will increase his level of comfort, an important element of identity building.

Here are a few suggestions to help you maximize your youngster’s cognitive and linguistic awareness. Note, too, that, in the case of intercultural couples, all of these tips are also valid for the other language! Reading in both languages will help to develop strong bilingualism, but you should focus more attention on the French. Since French is the minority language, it must receive greater attention in the development of linguistic bilingualism. Children learn by observation and imitation. Role models are extremely important. In addition to reading to your child, read in front of her. For a boy, the participation of his father, big brother, etc., is vital. Popular culture (films, television) rarely shows men and boys reading.

Set aside a time for reading, at the same place and time every day, to develop routine. Re-read the child’s favourite book as often as she wishes, on the same evening or from one day to the next, for repetition.

During the reading, ask questions about the story or the pictures to let the child experience success (rewarding). [Where’s the dog on this page? What sound does a dog make? Woof, woof! Bravo!] This is especially useful for a youngster who can’t sit still. Don’t hesitate to repeat the same questions (repetition, rewarding) over and over again.

Read with a great deal of feeling (intonation). For a dragon, use a deep or low pitched voice. For a tiny mouse, speak with a squeaky voice.

Get the child to participate in the story. (“The little mouse is hiding behind the door because she’s afraid of the cat. Where would you hide? In the closet? Good idea! [rewarding] Come on, let’s hide under the table and wait for the child’s reaction [rejoicing] You’re right, I goofed! You caught me! [rewarding] If the child does not react, laugh and say, “Oops, I goofed! [rejoicing] Where’s the closet? Thanks! [rewarding].] One day, your child will read [interpret] the world, regardless of language… it’s up to you to help her succeed.

** Valid for languages that use characters based on Latin, not for Arabic or Chinese.
*** Parenthèses, May 2011.