

Raising Bilingual-Biliterate Children in Monolingual Cultures

Stephen J. Caldas. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters. 2006. Pp. xvi + 231.

Stephen J. Caldas and his wife, Suzanne, wanted to rear their children, John, Stephanie, and Valerie, to be bilingual and biliterate in both English and French in order to move easily between two monolingual cultures— Louisiana, USA, their primary residence, and Québec, Canada, where the family usually spent summer vacations. This longitudinal study or “family project,” in the author’s words, lasted 19 years from the author’s children’s early childhood to their late adolescence and is documented in *Raising Bilingual-Biliterate Children in Monolingual Cultures*. By elaborately recounting the strategies that he and his wife used in their children’s linguistic development, the author hopes to enlighten parents who also intend to bring up their children bilingually. Additionally, many findings are certainly appealing to both educators and researchers, including those related to the issues of peer influence on linguistic development during adolescence, the construction of bilingual identities, and the changes in accents and perceptions of accents that occur.

The book is organized into 12 chapters. Chapter 1, “Introduction and Focus of the Book,” clearly defines the author and his wife’s goal in raising their children bilingually: they wanted their children to be “functionally biliterate” and to speak both English and French “with native-like fluency” (p. 1) and without foreign accents. The author points out that the strengths of the study lie in the parents’ first-hand experience and scientific documentation. Although confident about the successful implementation of the family project, the author recognizes that some strategies he and his wife adopted are not generalizable on account of different familial situations. The author also claims that “the central rationale for this book” is to dispel “myths about language and language acquisition” (p. 8) such as English being threatened by minority languages.

In chapter 2, “Bilingualism in America,” the author gives a historical overview of the ups and downs of bilingual education in the United States, a literature review concerning the relationship between multilingualism and academic achievement as well as cognitive abilities, and a historical overview of the language situation in Louisiana. Chapter 3, “Methodology: Taking the Measure of the Project,” outlines the qualitative and quantitative research methods employed in the study. According to the author, mixed methods can enhance a more comprehensive examination of the children’s linguistic development. Additionally, the dual roles of parents and researchers put the author and his wife in the best position to study the issue.

Chapter 4, “Bilingual Antecedents,” describes the development of the romance between the author, an English monolingual, and his wife, a French-speaking Québécoise, and their efforts to attain biliteracy as well as bilingualism. Their own learning experiences provided some of the strategies they employed with their children. The author also points out that this study is contextualized in a middle-class family, that the communities they have lived in are primarily middle-class, and that the schools their children have attended are primarily composed of children from middle-class families, before discussing the influence of the home, community, and school on the children’s bilingualism in chapters 5 and 6.

The first part of chapter 5, “Home and Community,” is devoted to the discussion of the influence of the home on the children’s developing bilingualism. To that end, the author

discusses the implications of the language policy at home and the strategy of the whole family spending summer vacations in Quebec. Despite the French-only policy at home, the children were exposed to more English, especially when the family lived in Anglophone Louisiana. Thus, the children had a preference for speaking English. Realizing the need for more French immersion, the author and his wife planned yearly summer vacations in Québec. The strategy worked very well. The move into a Cajun community in Louisiana also led the children to speak more French and meanwhile to pick up a Cajun accent. In this chapter, the author also draws attention to two interesting phenomena in the experience of raising children bilingually: he and his wife both tended to discipline their children in English and the children came to understand the arbitrariness of languages, that is, what is taboo in one language may be acceptable in another. Unfortunately, the author does not go beyond presenting these two phenomena. An examination of why they were more likely to scold in English and the effects of that strategy on children would be fascinating. Some other questions are worth exploring, too. For example, what influence did the awareness of linguistic relativity have on their children? Did it really liberate thinking processes as claimed by some researchers?

Chapter 6, "The School," elaborates on the influence of formal schooling on the children's developing bilingualism and biliteracy. In the partial French immersion programs in Louisiana, the children excelled academically in both English and French. Based on their children's first Québec schooling experience that took place over one summer, the author concludes that their children were able to function well in a francophone school at their level, and that authentic language immersion in a Canadian school was far superior to the language immersion program in Louisiana, wherein the children were extrinsically motivated by factors such as good grades. The author even argues that an immersion program in which learners are in contact with native speakers may be the best for second language students, but he also points out that in the case of his children, they already spoke the language and had basic reading and writing skills. Thus, it is obvious that there are many factors to consider, and authentic language immersion may not be the best method of learning for all second language learners. In this chapter, the author also includes a section about peer influence on the use of Anglicism and the accents in his children's French.

Chapter 7, "Reading, Media, Hobbies, and Games," first introduces the strategies the author and his wife adopted in teaching reading and the development of their children's reading abilities. Some of the strategies were as follows: the parents were indiscriminate in their choice of English or French stories; their reading sessions began when the children were toddlers; and they made their reading sessions frequent, fun, and interactive experiences. Although the parents read to them constantly in both English and French, the children began to read in English first; only after their first semester in a French immersion program did they begin reading in French. The author and his wife believe that the French-speaking media served to promote the children's French fluency and literacy, while the hobbies that the children pursued and the games that they played in English were a challenge to their family project.

The next three chapters examine peer influence with respect to the children's language preferences in early, middle, and late adolescence, respectively. During early adolescence in Louisiana, the children's use of French decreased dramatically because "the peer culture [had] implanted English as the informal language of communication in a school environment" (p. 119). Although all three primarily spoke French in Québec, they quickly shifted back to English after

returning to the United States. It is also during early adolescence that the children became concerned about their accents in speaking French. This strong peer influence continued during mid-adolescence. In particular, the influence of the English-speaking peers continued to squelch the children's efforts in speaking French in Louisiana, while their French-speaking peers during summers in Québec continued to have a positive effect on the children's French speaking ability in both pronunciation and fluency. In late adolescence, the children moved beyond peer influence and displayed a more mature linguistic identity "marked by greater linguistic self-confidence and diminished self-consciousness regarding language choice" (p. 147).

Chapter 11, "Taking the Measure of Bilingualism," offers a quantitative analysis of the children's bilingualism and biliteracy at different developmental stages. In chapter 12, "Lessons Learned, Broader Implications and Guidelines for Parents," the author summarizes the findings in terms of the influence of adolescence on language development, the strengths and weaknesses of (partial) school immersion programs, and the value of authentic (total) immersion. Throughout the book, the author argues for the possibility of "trying to teach a minority language in a majority language environment," though it is as difficult as "swimming upstream" (p. 202). Indeed, the success of his family project is exhilarating news for immigrant parents or parents hoping to raise their children bilingually. The secret, according to the author, lies in language immersion in families, classrooms, communities, and peer groups. Although the author does recognize the uneasiness caused by language immersion, he is convinced that such moments will pass quickly, based on his own and his children's experiences. Just as the author points out, many findings of the study are "just observations and not empirically proven facts" (p. 160). Hence, parents wishing to rear their children bilingually must be cautious in absorbing and applying the strategies employed in the author's family project.

Overall, the book provides many valuable observations of and insights into children's bilingual and biliterate development from childhood to adolescence. Raising bilingual-biliterate children in monolingual cultures is very complicated, just as the author aptly demonstrated. What the best bilingual program is and how to ensure children's fluency in a minority language are issues that are still in need of further investigation.

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