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Eye contact, touch, smiles, and movements are also important. The young baby is even able to mirror some face expressions. The approach you have adopted to teaching your young children combines spoken language with gestures. Using these natural responses is well established in teaching languages to young children. They combine physical movements (sometimes called Total Physical Response) with spoken language. Normal childhood activities include learning nursery rhymes, action rhymes and songs that capture the child's interest by combining words with actions and movements. This is an approach now increasingly used for teaching languages in kindergarten and primary schools. As well as teaching the form of the language they also teach a cultural heritage.

I am not aware of any research that has been carried out into the use of Makaton specifically. However, BSL and Auslan are established language systems, taught in some bilingual education programmes. The approach you suggest does seem to combine vocalising with gesture and this reflects the naturalist way in which babies approach language learning and interactions. Makaton may be useful for basic keyword signing, and naming or labelling is the earliest stage in language development. Children learn through practice so it is not possible to guess the role of Makaton signs in your children's language learning nor to predict if they will remember them into later childhood.

I'm sorry I can't be of more direct help but I do hope that you find these comments of interest. As a speech pathologist you may welcome a more detailed and technical account of learning languages in the home and school. If so, may I recommend my book:

Foley, J. & Thompson, L. (2003)
Learning Language: A Lifelong Process
ISBN 0-340-76282-9 (pbk)

Linda Thompson,
Nanyang Technological University

the BFN needs you...

The *BFN* cannot exist without the contributions of its readers. We welcome articles, anecdotes, queries and letters on all aspects of language learning and intercultural living. Please contact us to discuss the possibilities:

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AZBUKA – bringing UK minority-language education into the 21st century

Maria Gavrilova



I didn't get my first big culture shock until I had been living in London for about 10 years, triggered by the birth of my first daughter. I was shocked to find so little second language culture in this country. I could find no Russian nurseries and, in fact, very few foreign language nurseries at all. I could find no purely bilingual schools, few publications on multilingualism, and those publications that did exist were mostly specialist academic research. Relatively few second-generation children are fluent in their mother tongue here and there was an apparent total "multilingual void" in the supposedly multicultural metropolis called London. Such a renowned multicultural city should potentially be a haven for bilingual education and bilingualism.

My second big shock was in fact a sub-culture shock, from my own Russian speaking community. When we searched for a Russian language play group and found out there wasn't one, this led us to the obvious solution – start your own. *AZBUKA* started with a play group and then a proper nursery school. We were expecting to see parents queuing up for a place. That didn't happen. Why?

Knowledge is everything. The absence of accurate information and advice on bilingualism in this country is the reason for peoples' fears. It is a proven fact that it is possible to bring up a child bilingually in a monolingual environment. The central question - i.e. how best to do this? - should be discussed, shared and debated by both linguists and the general public. Unfortunately, if there is a debate, the subject is normally around "foreign languages for children" and not the entirely different issue of bilingual education.

True, many issues related to language acquisition and bilingualism are being constantly discovered and researched, but certain things that have become common knowledge and everyday practice in other countries are not known in England. Those basics, that have proven successful in bilingual education programmes around

the world, became a foundation of *AZBUKA org* – Russian nursery, school and Club.

AZBUKA Russian Nursery

At the time of writing, I have just received another call from a Russian family upset that despite the home language being Russian, their child goes to an English nursery and at the age of 3 already speaks mostly English with her Russian-born friends. Yesterday I had a similar conversation with a Russian mother and English father whose child has been sent to an English nursery.

Why is a minority-language nursery so important? 2 – 5 years old is the age when any language develops spontaneously. This is the crucial age when children can pick up any language through simple play and communication with other people – especially other children. In a country

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where structural bilingual education programmes are rare, the nursery stage is the only time where you can have a solid foundation in a minority language before the child moves on to primary school.

When considering bilingual education, parents often express the fear that their child's English will suffer. In the vast majority of cases this proves to be unfounded. Bilingual education in a minority language is unlikely to affect the child's English, or any other 'majority language'. This is also supported by research on the subject, particularly in the USA.

In everyday life many of us may know people who may have immigrated from another country in early childhood. Usually they develop the same command of the majority language as their friends, providing they had a standard social exposure to the language outside the home. From the age of 8, approximately, this ability falls (especially regarding pronunciation). Try to think of any of your friends who came into the country in their

teen years or later. Some of them will probably be OK on the conversation side, but may well retain the strong foreign accent for example. In the case of a country where English dominates in all areas of life, the pre-school age is the best chance to acquire the foundations of the minority language.

Minority language immersion at that age has to be solid and consistent – a few hours a week won't do – a daily nursery environment is much better. In some European countries, sending a child to a full-time foreign language nursery is standard practice. So what do we do at *AZBUKA Nursery*? We discover the world, we experiment with different materials, we learn through play, we introduce children to music and sounds, we dance and experiment with movements, we act, we perform, we sing, we enjoy theatre, we create, we read, we ask questions and learn to think, we develop socially, we learn and we have fun. We don't learn Russian, we learn through play – in Russian. Whether a child has Russian support at home or not, they will acquire the language by being immersed in the language environment with their classmates and peers.

AZBUKA Russian School

In the most successful bilingual programmes, such as those in North America, once the child has a solid foundation in a second language they continue learning a percentage of subjects in that language in secondary school. Unfortunately, schools like this are virtually unheard of in the UK (the first bilingual French school is supposed to be opening in London), and most minority languages are left with the Saturday school option.

Whilst it would be wrong to over generalise, many Saturday schools have next to no knowledge of bilingualism. Their minority language teaching is often based on text books designed for monolingual kids from their own country. Many employ very good language teachers, but all too often they too have little or no knowledge of bilingualism. Some of these Saturday schools are in effect stuck in the last century in regards to their methodology.

Successful second language schools have specially developed programmes, technical resources, and teaching ideas that have not simply been imported from schools for monolingual children. They should stimulate the child's spoken language and give them a chance and desire to practice that language with other children spontaneously. Special "project based" methods are also developed for teaching reading and writing. Why do we communicate? What

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The Professor as Parent: Colin Baker



Apart from writing books on bilingualism, you and Anwen successfully raised three bilingual children? Yet in your books you almost never talk about your own experience.

True. Anwen and I have three fully bilingual children – although they are now age 20 to 25. When writing, I need to be as general as possible. And the danger is that my personal experience is not generalisable. So I have tried not to use my own family for evidence of what works and does not work.

Were all three children's routes to bilingualism easy?

No. One of the three required specialist language advice. The other two were straightforward. The oldest, a girl, was very language oriented and could translate between English and Welsh at two years of age with ease. There was a specific moment when I realised how easy bilingualism was for a young child. Sara, age two, was asked by her mother in Welsh to tell her English grandparents that food was ready. She turned to my mother and father and translated perfectly. The monolinguals were stunned; the bilinguals just thought this was very ordinary.

The second born, a boy, always played with language, full of witticisms and creativity when speaking. His bilingual humour can relieve the most tense of situations.

The youngest experienced language delay. He understood everything in both Welsh and English, but would rarely speak. Some of our friends blamed it on bilingualism. I knew from close observation that it was nothing to do with bilingualism. A specialist agreed. In retrospect it seems a combination of his two older siblings answering for him, a preference for mathematics and not words (he is currently studying mathematics), and just being a very lovable and loving 'cool dude'.

You support OPOL – One Parent One Language. Yet I've been told you spoke Welsh to your children when they were very young. Why is that?

I do support OPOL. The evidence is overwhelming that it works. My concern is when a child's bilingualism will be a combination of a minority language and a majority language. Take Wales as an example. English is so strong in the street, shops and screen, and of such high

status in the teenage years, that it seems an early balance towards the minority language will ensure firm grounding before English becomes so strong in a young person's life. I talked Welsh to the children both to ensure a strong linguistic grounding, but also to convey that I thought Welsh was important and valuable.

But was your second language Welsh a good model?

No. My Welsh is not that proficient, so around the age of two I gently switched to using English with the children. We moved from early monolingualism into OPOL and it worked.

Do your children value their bilingualism?

I suppose you would have to ask them. My daughter works in a hospital and I know her interactions with patients utilize both languages. She recognizes that caring for someone includes speaking their preferred language – both for understanding their medical care and for building relationships. My elder son is in a job that requires good customer relations and he uses both languages for that purpose. The younger son uses Welsh in his social and love life in University, and English in studying mathematics.

Despite them knowing that I study bilingualism, I don't think any of them have read a page of what I've written! So their valuing of bilingualism is gained through experience rather than lectures.

Are the children Welsh or British or Europeans or what?

I think they are all of these, and sometimes differ according to who they are with and what they are doing. I suppose one thing I am proud of is that they are not anti-English or anti-British. They value different languages, different cultures and different lifestyles. That seems to be an important aim in raising bilinguals, that they become tolerant of diversity, even non-racist, due to them operating in different cultures. Because bilinguals have different languages, at best they appreciate difference in others. Our children can potentially be blessed with more than bilingual brains, as their language experience can affect their values and viewpoint. Bilinguals own much more than two languages.

Colin Baker is one of the leading experts on bilingualism. His books, including *A Parents and Teachers Guide to Bilingualism* and the new fourth edition of *Foundations of Bilingualism and Bilingual Education* are available at 20% discount from: www.multilingual-matters.com

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is the language for? Trying to answer these questions will make any Saturday minority language school both more enjoyable and more effective.

At *AZBUKA School* we have been developing a structured Russian language programme for bilingual kids. The programme is designed to keep up and develop all levels of language – both spoken language and reading and writing skills. We run teaching blocks that incorporate different methods (theatre, games, internet, new media, music, dance, movement, game based projects etc.). The programme is content based. It means that if a child is interested in the content (what the lesson is about) and methods (how the lesson is taught) their language will be stimulated and they will want to communicate spontaneously. Our programme also incorporates projects for the children to do at home – language support during the week, not just for the few hours on Saturdays, is essential.

AZBUKA Russian Club

Language is linked to a culture. The more you are interested in the culture, the more you wish to speak the language. Many second generation kids become detached from the culture and history of their parents, through no fault of their own of course. Often they are just unlucky not to have access to a stimulating language school or a club or any other cultural environment that isn't dominated by English. This is why, in addition to the education programmes above, we run *AZBUKA Club* which puts on cultural events, theatre productions and celebrations. *AZBUKA Club* is for everyone – children learning Russian, their parents, Russian language enthusiasts, teachers and other people who have an interest in bilingualism. It is also there to share knowledge on bilingual education with parents through the events, our library and newsletter.

For me, to be bilingual and enjoy more than one culture is a gift that is way too important to lose. Bilingual children's acquisition of languages is so different from their monolingual peers, and understanding the nature of these differences is everything in developing successful educational programmes with effective methodology that keep the second language alive. Has anybody met an adult speaking two languages who was not grateful to their parents?

www.AZBUKA.org – Ofsted registered nursery and Saturday school Club

If anyone is interested in joint projects with AZBUKA (for any other minority

Taking Your Language Home – Teaching the Minority Language in School Time

Ann Giles



We are a family of four living in England. My husband is British and I am Swedish. We have a son, Ian, who is 17 and a daughter, Helen, 13. Ever since Ian was born we have used the OPOL method, and it seems to have worked fairly well. Ian now speaks Swedish fluently and without much of an accent, reads a bit and writes very little. He said nothing in Swedish to me until he was seven when he suddenly switched, having first “practised” it on my mother for a few months.

Helen started saying things a lot earlier and with, initially, a much better accent, but after a while it became clear she wasn't progressing much from there on. However she has always been able to mimic my accent very closely. It took us years to work out that Helen has Asperger Syndrome (AS) and we had a long period of fighting her primary school for a bit of simple sympathy and understanding. The move to secondary school was a good one and she has now grown much calmer.

Language wise Helen has been far behind her brother in Swedish, but I have persevered, with only some words being reinforced with a translation into English as well. Helen has also been more cautious with English and sometimes uses phrases that sound like those a non-native speaker might use. She's clearly intelligent however, and does very well at most subjects at school, as long as language isn't allowed to get in the way.

Last year, in Year 7 at school, she started German. This went quite well, perhaps because of the similarities with Swedish, and Helen seemed confident. This was in contrast to her attempt at French in an after school club where she simply got too bewildered and gave it up. Helen's secondary school starts pupils on a second foreign language in Year 8, which in her

case would be French. For Y9 she would then be required to drop one of the languages again, and it felt obvious it would be the French. It appeared pointless to start, struggle with, and stop a fourth language when her energies could be better used on the three she wanted to be good at.

I was inspired by something I'd read several years ago in the BFN about a father who had claimed the right to teach the minority language during school hours. I felt this might be the way forward for us, as Helen is generally so exhausted after her normal school day that I couldn't just add more for her to do. I approached Helen's school referring to the parent from the BFN and asked to be allowed to teach her Swedish during the three one hour lessons per fortnight when the rest of her form learnt French. They agreed and in September 2005 we got started. I have a degree in English and Swedish, but very little experience of teaching.

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We started with Swedish pre-school exercise books, to learn colours, numbers, food and so on. Previously Helen had always resisted being taught anything and didn't listen to much I tried to tell her. Now that Swedish had turned into a school subject I got a lot more attention. From early on we also tackled magazine articles in Swedish, either on subjects relevant to us or on fascinating topics like Britney Spears. I started reading aloud from a child detective type of novel and Helen listened to Harry Potter on cassette in Swedish.

All in all we did both far more than her friends did in French and also less. All the lessons were in Swedish and a lot of the vocabulary was at anything but beginner's level. At the same time we did very little grammar and spelling, unlike a “proper” school lesson. My emphasis was always in improving Helen's spoken language and to make it possible for her to read occasional texts. I wanted to make her feel more part of Swedish life and less like a Martian dropped from outer space. We did try