



**Bilingualism Matters Edinburgh Webinar
Refugee Week 2020: Let's Celebrate Languages! 15/06/20**

Unanswered questions from the audience

1. My children speak English with each other and their friends but I cannot understand them - what do I do?

Antonella: I assume you are learning English as a second language. First of all, you will improve and will be able to understand more and more - children can be faster but adults can learn languages well too. I don't know how old your children are, but for the moment, encourage them to speak the home language to each other, without forcing them to do so. Explain to them that you don't understand English very well and that you don't like to be left out - as they wouldn't either. Be patient when they speak English to their friends, that's normal and is part of their social integration.

Nadin: it is really frustrating when parents feel there is a gap between their children's life/ friendships because of language. Let's understand children pick up the language quickly because of language exposure. Take your time to follow simple tips to help you like attending English classes in your local community, attend English classes online if you cannot go out or have other responsibilities. Sign up for a befriending scheme where you can meet new people who are interested to learn your language and about your culture. Watch TV and read short stories.

2. What do you think helps most for schools to engage and support with families?

Antonella:

We think that information about bilingualism is important: many teachers don't know enough about what it means for adults and children to move to a new language environment and how they can learn languages. Bilingualism Matters can offer resources for families and other kinds of support for schools, including seminars and Q&A sessions.

Nadin: Keep connected. It is great to show families that schools care about their language/ religion/ and differences by celebrating these difference (celebrating language). Giving them the chance to share their language and feel proud about it. Create a sense of community of between the school and families and share resources

3. What about children of parents that speak the same language but with different accents? (e.g: British and American English). Any insights?

Antonella: That's actually more and more common and it's absolutely fine: they speak different varieties of the same language. Children will learn both accents and will adapt their

accent depending on the people they talk to and where they are.

4. If the parents are also trying to learn English and but don't leave the house very often, what language should be spoken at home? The parent also wants to learn and practice English but don't have all the English exposure their child has at school.

Antonella: We think that it's better to speak the home language not only because it's good for children to maintain it, but also because it's much more expressive and meaningful for communication within the family. It's true that it would be important for parents to get more opportunities to use the language outside the home, which isn't always easy.

Nadin: I think this is similar to the first question. My advice is to keep the home language at home, this is the only recourse for your children to speak your own language. Once you pick up English it will be so difficult for you and your children to switch back. Learning a new language will take a time it is best to expose yourself to other resources like attending online English classes, YouTube videos, sign up for a befriending scheme to meet people who are interested to learn your language and about your culture. Do not feel shy to speak.

5. Suppose a bilingual child makes friends at school who also speak that home language. They might want to speak that language together at school, but it may exclude them from other friend circles or prevent integration in school. Should the home language be restricted to non-school settings? What to do in such a case?

Antonella: Ideally there should be a recognition (by adults and children) that different languages exist and they can all be used in particular kinds of communication. This doesn't always happen. But it is counter-productive to 'restrict' the use of home languages by preventing children to use them outside the family setting, as it may lead to valuing languages differently. In practice, many children realise that their home language is used mostly at home and English outside the home, and behave accordingly without a need to 'enforce' rules.

Nadin: Circumstances, age and exposure are always different. I can think of a 10-year-old girl who just arrived to a new country with a new language, definitely she will feel more confident to speak her own language with her friends who share the same language until she picks up the language and feels confident to other friends. Children always try to speak the language of their friends at nursery/ school and so on not to feel different and excluded, this is called play language. They feel more confident to express themselves that why they tend to speak English with their sisters/ brothers at home.

6. My oldest child is bilingual (trilingual, Spanish, Catalan and English) but she is struggling with literacy because she has dyslexia. I have always supported bilingualism, but I am not sure how to support her bilingualism and her literacy with the dyslexia. Do you have any advice to support her literacy while not abandoning supporting her bilingualism?

Antonella: There is no evidence that bilingualism causes, or worsens, dyslexia. In fact, some studies show the opposite pattern - I can send some pointers if needed. My advice would be to focus on literacy in one language, rather than in more than one. Since all three languages have the same writing system, eventually there may be positive 'transfer' of skills in one

language to the others (for example, phonological awareness).

7. In particular for refugee children and families: what can teachers do to bridge any gaps between the community and the school, so that students and parents feel valued in the classroom, especially if it's not a dual-language classroom?

Antonella: We know it's not easy, but schools can create more opportunities for parents to get involved in activities that celebrate languages and cultures, and make all students aware of both by having them work together in common projects where the refugee and migrant children are the experts. We've seen wonderful examples of schools that successfully do this.

8. As someone who is monolingual I'm really surprised that bilingualism isn't viewed as positive. Where do the roots of this exist?

Antonella: The global status of English is one of the factors that leads to downplaying the importance of other languages; ignorance about bi/multilingualism is another big factor.

9. What is the difference between translanguaging and polylinguaging?

Antonella: I'm not so familiar with the term 'polylinguaging', but there now is a range of terms that emphasise the social use of two or more languages in interaction without observing the boundaries between one language and another.

10. My children's grandmother is fluent in Malayalam, Hindi with a little English. Her children were taught English via a boarding school in Tamil Nadu. All chats between her and her son are conducted either in English or Malayalam at primary school level without emotional complexity or connection beyond basic expression. How does bilingualism also meet children's development in different languages and cultures?

Antonella: This is a common feeling in migrant families: that the use of the home language is confined to early childhood expressions, especially with older members of the family. To some extent this is unavoidable, as languages are intimately related to experience.

11. Do you see a relevance of children picking up more on the home language when the maternal grandma is the one speaking the heritage language, instead of paternal?

Antonella: This is not too surprising given traditional divisions of roles within families, e.g. women spending more time with children than men and so maternal grandmas are likely to have spent more time with their kids and have practiced the home language more. But I know many exceptions to the rule, and both grandmas can be wonderful sources of input for their grandchildren!