

Re: second language acquisition in 2 1/2-year-old

Source: <http://sci.tech-archive.net/Archive/sci.lang/2004-11/1059.html>

From: mb (azythos2_at_hotmail.com)

Date: 11/09/04

Date: 9 Nov 2004 13:36:33 -0800

athel@ibsm.cnrs-mrs.fr (Athel Cornish-Bowden) wrote

> *I can't give any statistics, just describe my experience with my
> daughter, who is now 21 and has been trilingual (English, Spanish,
> French), speaking all three languages at or beyond the level for her
> age, since the age of 4. I am a native English speaker and when my
> daughter was born I had distant memories of school French, and almost
> no Spanish. My wife is a native Spanish speaker, who spoke English
> fluently when our daughter was born, and her French was at about the
> same level as mine.*
>
> *Our daughter was born in England and, apart from eight weeks in Chile
> and Colombia at the age of 12 months the only conversations she heard
> until she was 2 1/2 were in English. However, my wife always spoke to
> her in Spanish (and still does). At about the time when she was
> starting to speak (English) she went for 15 months to Chile, and when
> she returned to England she was able to speak Spanish but although she
> could understand English she didn't speak it. In the space of about
> two weeks she switched from speaking only Spanish to speaking only
> English. During the next three months she started using both (but
> never getting them confused). Then we moved to live in France. During
> the trip (aged 3 1/2) she made it clear that she understood that
> English was "my" language whereas Spanish was my wife's: she said
> something to my wife in Spanish, and then immediately repeated the
> same thing to me in English.*
>
> *Not long after arriving in France she started going to a school where
> she heard only French (school starts very young in France). For about
> six months she never said anything at home in French, but once she
> started it became clear that her French was normal for her age.*
>
> *During this early period I sometimes worried whether she would be
> confused, but she never showed any signs of being confused, and never
> mixed the languages. Occasionally (after her French had advanced a
> long way) she used French words in English sentences, but you could
> always hear the quotation marks, i.e. there was never any doubt that
> she knew perfectly well that the word was French and was just using it
> because she didn't know the English equivalent.*

I would say this corresponds to what I have seen both in my immediate environment and in all "successful" cases of the surveys I worked in.

The key to the outcome is, I think, is in the following passages:

"never getting them confused"

"(aged 3 1/2) she made it clear that she understood that English was "my" language whereas Spanish was my wife's: she said something to my wife in Spanish, and then immediately repeated the same thing to me in English."

"For about six months she never said anything at home in French"

"During this early period I sometimes worried whether she would be confused, but she never showed any signs of being confused, and never mixed the languages. Occasionally ... she used French words in English sentences, but you could always hear the quotation marks, i.e. there was never any doubt that she knew perfectly well that the word was French and was just using it because she didn't know the English equivalent."