



Round Table

Round tables at the Berlin Metropolitan School are aimed at both educating and fostering discussions amongst all stakeholders of the community, with the central purpose of extending key components of our culture, vision, and mission statement.

ROUNDTABLE: LANGUAGE ACQUISITION FEBRUARY 2015

Professor Zydati is a university professor and lecturer from Free University Berlin, Department of English Language and Literature and renowned expert for Bilingual Learning at the Institute for English Philology.

The second roundtable at Berlin Metropolitan School focused on Language Acquisition and the complexities of learning a first and second language. Before an audience of parents from all sections of the school, Professor Wolfgang Zydati*, outlined the various theories behind language acquisition and bilingualism, the developmental features of a bilingual student, as well as the stages a student progresses through while learning and living in a bilingual environment.

Academic vs. Social Language

While the benefits of bilingualism are clearly positive, he stressed the importance for both families and the school to understand the difference in language use for the bilingual child, as well as the long-term investment both groups must make for academic success. Academic language (the language of schooling) as well as social language (the language of the playground or social setting) proficiency were key focus points in the presentation, whereby academic language is a matter and measure of cognition, with complexities that are dictated by the demands of the subject and the requirement of the line of argumentation. The social language is lower in cognition ability and demands, thereby allowing students to learn from peers and use informal language in appropriate settings.

Supporting your Child

Professor Zydati outlined the strong environmental influence of languages and its high impact on the outcomes of language acquisition and hence, outlined how the success of bilingual learning is in the hands of both the family and the school. In order to support this process, the home support offered to



primary and preschool students in way of literacy and academic literacy activities, can greatly support the student in establishing the foundation for scholastic success. By actively supporting the budding narrative cognition at the preschool and primary school level particularly, parents can seek out active discussions with their child at home, through an interest in the day-to-day schooling as well as examples such as interactive reading.

In order to guide parents through the complex stages of language acquisition for bilingual or multilingual families, Professor ZydatiB offered practical tips for parents of students from all age groups on how best to support their student through the process of developing both academic and social language skills. A detailed bibliography of suggested resources can be found at the end of this document as well.

FAQs

How can we support language acquisition in the bilingual household? What theory or strategy can we follow as a parent to support my child?

One person—one language. In a bilingual family, one parent adopts one language to speak with the child, while the other speaks only the other language to the child. Alternatively, parents can seek out the “home language” and “local language” whereby parents speak a selected language at home and the other language outside the home. In either case, consistency is key.

When will my child achieve fluency? How long will it take?

Just as the distinction in academic and social language is important, so too is the need to understand how language acquisition works. A bilingual education is a long-term investment for families and as such, should be seen with realistic expectations and with the clear understanding that removing a child from the bilingual education can do certain degree of disservice to his or her learning. Generally speaking, language proficiency for the academic language takes 5-7 schooling years and for a social language, 1-2 schooling years.

We speak German and Spanish at home; should we give up Spanish and speak English to improve the English language ability, which is weak?

No, the general strategy and thinking here is that by developing the German by mom or dad speaking it at home, for instance, the underlining cognitive conceptual system develops as well as the language; the skills and abilities are then transferred to another language and overall abilities in all languages increases.

Should I speak to my child in a language which is not my native language?

If the proficiency of the language is weak, is it very strongly inadvisable to speak to the child in this language. It is then the role of the school to ensure social and academic language is developed efficiently.

What if one language is stronger than the other over a period of time?

Language acquisition does not develop in a lineal and concrete manner and hence, your child’s ability to communicate in the languages will not follow the same developmental path or time frame for either language.

What tools found in the home environment can support first or second language learning?

Taking an active role in your child’s day-to-day learning, forming language play groups, scheduling visits abroad, interactive reading, offering age-appropriate language books to students of all ages in both languages, as well as a close partnership with the school and its method for academic language acquisition, are all practical tips to help support bilingual learning. In addition, if a parent notices that one language is becoming weaker, seek out quality time in that language. For instance, when museum visits are scheduled in the language which is weaker is spoken. In the words of Professor ZydatiB “be consistent and not afraid to be insistent”.

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