ABSTRACT
In this research paper, I attempted to find whether the One Parent One Language (OPOL) approach, which has been the suggested strategy for raising bilingual children (Baker, 2011), is worth implementing for parents who plan to raise simultaneous bilingual children.
One Parent One Language Approach

Raising a child as a simultaneous bilingual is challenging and not all bilingual parents who attempt to raise their child bilingual are successful. In fact I know some couples who tried and gave up on raising their children as bilinguals of Japanese and English. If I was to raise my child as a simultaneous bilingual, I would want to make sure that I implement the best method to make that happen. Baker (2011) states that One Parent One Language (OPOL) approach has been the suggested strategy for raising a bilingual child, and I think this is because OPOL seems to be a very simple method to implement for the parents: one parent speaks one language to a child and the other parent speaks in the other language. On the other hand, De Houwer found that OPOL approach did not provide the necessary or sufficient context for raising bilingual children (as cited in Baker, 2011, p. 99). It is known that community influence plays an important role towards raising bilingual children (Baker, 2011). If a family lives in a bilingual community with an ideal environment for raising a bilingual child (e.g. child having access to both language input and speakers in the community), is it worthwhile to implement OPOL when it actually requires a big commitment from the parents and does not guarantee success? This paper raises three primary questions: (1) what are the benefits of implementing OPOL other than the provision of input from two languages and the establishment of language boundaries, (2) what are the common factors or reasons for OPOL failure to raise bilinguals, and (3) are additional supportive stimuli needed besides OPOL for the development of productive bilingualism and how are they effective?
**Benefits of implementing OPOL**

The concept of “One Parent One Language” (OPOL) was first introduced by Ronjat’s (1913) case study of raising a bilingual child with the mother speaking German and the father speaking French in a French community (Baker, 2011). This case study argued that when each parent speaks a separate language to the child, it is an effective method of raising bilingual children. By each parent speaking only one language to the child, the exposure to two languages is assured. Also, some people argue that it helps a child to develop both languages independently without much interference from each other, which prevents the child from mixing the languages. The question is what else does OPOL approach assure the family who implements it? Besides these two factors, I cannot think of any beneficial factors that OPOL can guarantee the family. If that is the case, the assurance of the exposure to two languages could be supplemented by something else such as TV or a bilingual community.

According to Dopke (1998), there are three primary beneficial factors for implementing OPOL approach besides the child’s exposure to two languages by each parent. The first factor is the full range of parent-child interaction that a child experiences in the minority language. The unconditional use of the minority language by one parent ensures that the child will be exposed to the widest range of linguistic features, such as lexicons and syntactic structures. The second factor is the provision of language that is adjusted for age-appropriate context and complexity throughout the child’s linguistic development. A parent adjusts their language input naturally and gradually from simple to complex, which is the same case with a monolingual child’s parent. The third beneficial factor of implementing OPOL is that a parent is able to quickly detect the child’s linguistic gap between the majority and minority language through the child’s language mixing. For example, when a child is expected to fully respond in his minority language, he uses
a word from the majority language to fill in his lack of a lexical item in the minority language. His parent can quickly notice that he does not know the specific word and can then teach it to him. However, what if the child used the language-mixing not because of missing a lexical item but because of other reasons? While Deuchar and Quay (2000) argue that a child’s language mixing indicates a gap in lexical knowledge (as cited in Baker, 2011, p. 96), Toribio (2004) suggests that code-switching is not a random mixture of two flawed system, but rule-governed and systematic (as cited in Baker, 2011, p. 97). This suggests that the child might have used language-mixing, for example, out of a desire to include the other parent in the conversation who only speaks one language.

Even though one of the benefits of implementing OPOL seems to remain problematic, there are other beneficial factors that OPOL approach can provide for the family who implements it besides simply the child’s exposure to two languages. The OPOL provides the child with a full range of age-appropriate experience and input. Therefore, even though a family lives in an ideal bilingual community where a potential bilingual child has easy access to input from two languages, there are certain factors that the community cannot offer that parent-child interaction does. We see here that OPOL seems very effective in terms of providing the family with these beneficial factors, which brings me to the next question: why are there numerous unsuccessful cases reported from families who implemented OPOL (Dopke, 1992)?

**Common features for failure under OPOL**

While OPOL approach has been a popular method in which to raise a simultaneous bilingual child, there have been numerous unsuccessful cases reported (Dopke, 1992, 1998). Are there common characteristics or features among the parents or the environment which lead to the
child’s inability to gain an active command of his minority language? I think that a failure to provide a balanced exposure to both languages could be a common reason, due to the fact that the child spends more time with the parent who is the primary caretaker. The other reason for failure that I can think of is the difficulties that some parents face with maintaining their practice of OPOL. For the parent who speaks the minority language to the child, the OPOL can be difficult to sustain (e.g. speaking the minority language in a community where that minority language is not used), and the parent gives up on fully implementing the OPOL.

Dopke (1992) found in her qualitative research studying six German-English families who implemented OPOL approach in Australia that the lack or absence of the parents’ insistency of using one language, the lack of child centered behavior by the parents, and the lack of parent-child interaction seemed to be the determining factors for the OPOL failure cases. Even though the parents were consistent with using their assigned language with their child and the child received a great amount of input (i.e., the OPOL was greatly implemented), the child did not acquire an active command of German because the parents did not insist on the children using German in their responses. In addition to that, some parents did not display the required child centered behavior, for example, parent-child interaction which was more oriented towards controlling the child than conversing with the child, or they did not interact with their child as much as the parents who successfully raised a child with an active command of German.

In addition to Dopke’s (1992) findings, Takeuchi (2006) indentifies factors that correlate with degrees of success in Japanese language maintenance in Melbourne, Australia. After studying the cases of 43 children whose Japanese mothers implemented OPOL, she concluded that a mother’s consistent usage of Japanese and insistence on the child’s usage of Japanese in return directly correlated with the child’s level of active usage of Japanese.
From the findings of Dopke (1992) and Takeuchi (2006), the deficiency of parents’ insistence on a child’s usage of each language seems to negatively correlate with the success of the child’s active command. However, there might be a pitfall of leading a child refuse to speak a particular language if parents insist the child too much to use only that language with them when the child does not want to do so. According to Hayes & Steiner (2009), “the brain is naturally efficient, which means it strives to use the least amount of effort to get what it wants (p. 108).” In other words, if the majority language becomes a dominant language for the child, it is a quite natural process that he desires to only speak the dominant language. In fact, many parents who attempt to raise their children bilingual seem to have come across cases where they refuse to speak one of the two languages (Harding-Esch & Riley, 2003). Then what should parents do when their children refuse to speak one language while trying to follow the rule of “insistency”?

The first step to deal with this problem is to distinct between a short-period and long-period refusal (Harding-Esch & Riley, 2003). Sometime a bilingual child chooses not to speak one language when there are non-speakers of that language are present. Also, young children feel embarrassed when other people ask them to “show off” their ability to speak two languages, for example, when adults ask them to say “water” in two languages in front of strangers. These are examples of the short-period refusal; because bilingual children are in uncomfortable spot, they refuse to speak one language. If this is the case, parents need to keep in mind that children are sensitive and avoid to place them in such embarrassing or uncomfortable situation. When a child refuses to speak one language for a long period of time, being patient with them and explaining why and how important the bilingualism is for the child and family. Also, it is extremely important for parents to get what’s really bothering him. Harding-Esch and Riley (2003) state that if a child is still refuses to speak, which is a rare case, compromising to raise children to be
receptive bilingual is an option because making their life miserable is not a reasonable price for bilingualism. However, putting the child’s happiness first also means that parents should make every effort to encourage and maintain bilingual because he will need two languages to live a satisfying childhood. “Nothing might be sadder than, for example, ‘losing’ half your family (Harding-Esch & Riley, 2003, p. 88).

In conclusion, contrary to my belief, unbalanced exposure to the languages or the amount of input does not seem to be a common factor in the failure cases. Based on two case studies of Dopke (1992) and Takeuchi (2006), the parents’ insistency on child’ usage of each language to parents have a positive correlation with a degree of child’s active command of the minority or heritage language. Parents might face a child’s refusal to speak one of the two languages, and by insisting him to use that language might make the situation even worse. However, knowing why he is refusing and explaining the importance of maintaining the language will help parents to break through the tough phase of raising a bilingual child.

Additional stimuli to OPOL

So far I have discussed the benefits of implementing OPOL to support why parents should take this approach and the common features of unsuccessful cases with OPOL to disclose why there are many families that did not have a successful case of raising productive bilinguals. I would conclude that OPOL is a reasonable and effective approach for potential bilingual families. However, it is important to note that among all of the six children who were in the Dopke (1992) case study, there is only one child, Agnes, who seemed to have nearly exclusive exposure of OPOL. (It is not possible to determine which children were exclusively exposed to OPOL in Takeuchi’s (2006) study.) In Dopke’s study, Agnes’ exposure to German-speakers other than her
mother, watching TV in German, and going to a German-speaking community are not mentioned in her literature. Interestingly, Angus failed to acquire an active command of German. Does this suggest that implementing only OPOL does not guarantee a child’s success of acquiring active command of minority/heritage language? It is obvious that one result of a case does not allow anyone to generalize whether OPOL alone can support bilingualism. There is a necessity to analyze more results of studies on families who exclusively implement OPOL. However, I think the problem is that there is a lack of available resources for researchers to determine whether OPOL alone can support bilingualism. In other words, most parents who attempt to raise a bilingual child incorporate every potential and available stimulus while implementing OPOL. OPOL is a method that only involves a parent-child relationship, and it is only natural for those parents to take advantage of other available stimuli for raising a bilingual, rather than exclusively implementing OPOL, as most of parents did in Dopke (1992) and Takeuchi’s (2006) studies. This leads to my third question: how do the additional stimuli or bilingual environments affect a child’s development of bilingualism? Among many possible stimuli to support raising bilinguals, I focus on five stimuli: (1) TV programs/videos/DVDs, (2) books, (3) trips to communities where a minority/heritage language is spoken, (4) friends with the same minority/heritage language background, and (5) heritage language programs.

Some parents use TV programs or DVDs to increase a child’s language input. There are two different study findings/opinions among scholars and researchers. For example, Takeuchi’s (2006) study shows that only 17 percents of children who watched Japanese TV programs or videos actively spoke Japanese with their mothers. On the other hand, Hayes and Steiner (2009) state that recent research has shown that two quality programs, Sesame Street and Between the Lions, enhance language development in general. Also, for some children, repeated viewing of
videos helps them to memorize chunks of dialogue in the videos (Cunningham-Andersson & Andersson, 2004). It seems that educational programs have a positive effect on a child’s language development, but not all programs are effective.

The second stimulus that parents can offer at home is reading books in the minority/heritage language for their child. Unlike TV programs/videos/DVDs, there is an agreement among scholars that reading books supports a child’s language development. It seems that reading books is more effective than showing videos (Takeuchi, 2006), and families can obtain three different benefits (Andersson & Cunningham-Andersson, 2004). First, books are great resources for a child to be exposed to a wide variety of lexicon that a parent might not use with him in daily life. Second, a child following the written text while listening to a story helps to familiarize him with the writing system. This is a reasonable activity for some families who are planning to also teach how to read and write. The last benefit, which TV programs/videos/DVDS can offer as well, is introducing culture. For example, traditional fairy tales help to teach a child the unique cultural values and morals that the language community has.

One of common reasons that some families decide to raise their child bilingual is for him to be able to communicate with their monolingual family members. The monolingual family member might live nearby or in a different country. Whatever the situation, many families choose to take extended trips to see their monolingual family members or to visit the community where their heritage/minority language is used. In Takeuchi’s (2006) study, all 43 children visited Japan for a total duration ranging from three months to three years. However, the effects of their trip were temporary. In other words, they did not maintain the same level of Japanese usage upon their return to Australia. On the other hand, Harding-Esch and Riley (2003) argue that contact with the rest of the family does have a positive effect on the child’s linguistic
development. Interacting with cousins who are the child’s same generation provides an additional opportunity for him to be exposed to the spoken minority/heritage language rather than simply from his mother or father. One agreement among scholars is that besides the linguistic point of view, a trip to the language community or a family visit has a psychologically positive effect on a child. Imagine a young child who has never met other people who speak the heritage language other than his mother or father, and how he would be amazed by the new language environment he encounters. He would then better understand why his parents want him to learn that language (Harding-Esch & Riley, 2003). In addition to the linguistic and psychological benefits, the whole experience improves the child’s cultural competence (Andersson & Cunningham-Andersson, 2004).

How about having friends with the same language background? In Takeuchi’s (2006) study, six Japanese mothers commented that their children had friends who were also speakers of Japanese and English. However, when they played, they ended up using English, not Japanese. Andersson and Cunningham-Andersson (2004) state that interacting with friends who have the same language background is only an effective stimulus when the friends are monolingual. Therefore, if the children who participated in Takeuchi’s study had Japanese monolingual friends and needed to speak Japanese in order to communicate, the results could have produced more successful cases.

The last additional stimulus that parents could provide their children are heritage language programs. In Takeuchi’s (2006) study, generally the children who spent more time in Japanese Ethnic School were more likely to speak to their mother in Japanese. She reports that mothers depending on the school for their child’s development of Japanese withdrew them from the school and the child did not acquire an active command of Japanese. It appears that heritage
language programs help a child’s language development; however, without a parent’s support, a child might have a difficult time learning the heritage language and there is a chance that the program will become ineffective.

I think that the problematic point when talking about each stimulus is the difficulty of finding which stimulus is more effective than other and how much more effective. For example, Takeuchi (2006) concludes by trying to determine whether each additional stimulus seemed to help the child’s language development or not, but each stimulus was not exclusively provided along with OPOL. In other words, one stimulus was possibly implemented along with three other stimuli. Because there is a chance that one stimulus would have an affect on the effectiveness of the others, it is very difficult to see the true value of each stimulus. Beside this problem, by looking at the five additional stimuli that parents can provide besides OPOL, it seems that they could be useful and effective stimuli when parents are selective about which resource to use (i.e., educational TV programs) and are involved with the child’s language learning process (i.e., reading books, helping with homework). This suggests that quality over quantity has a greater positive influence on a child’s successful bilingualism (Dopke, 1992).

Conclusion

In this research paper, I attempted to find whether the One Parent One Language (OPOL) approach is worth implementing for parents who plan to raise simultaneous bilingual children. Besides the provision of input from two languages and the establishment of language boundaries, there are other potential benefits of implementing OPOL, such as a child’s exposure to a wide range of linguistic features, gradually transitioning from simple to complex as he becomes older. However, these benefits can only be obtained when parents are steadily consistent with a
language they are supposed to use with their child and need to insist on the child’s language usage in return. If a parent, especially one who is responsible for teaching a heritage/minority language, is constantly code-switching or frequently allows her child to respond to her in any language that the child wants, the family is unlikely to raise a productive bilingual child. In addition, the manner in which parents interact with their child seems to have an effect on the degree of the child’s active command of language. Parents should be engaged in their conversations with their child and actually converse with him, rather than trying to control him. Also, it seems that it is a logical behavior for parents to use other available resources to enhance their child’s bilingual development besides OPOL, because the OPOL approach only suggests how a parent-child linguistic relationship should be. Although other stimuli, such as reading books to a child and taking trips to the target language community, have some degree of positive effect on a child’s language development, it seems that the degree of effectiveness of each stimulus depends on how the parents incorporate them. In other words, the provision of stimuli alone might not lead to a successful case of raising a productive bilingual. Raising a bilingual is not an easy task and I do not believe that any strategy can guarantee success. However, when parents are committed to OPOL and actively participate in a child’s language development, they are more likely to successfully raise a productive bilingual.
References


