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Language disorder in a bilingual context

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Introduction



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Introduction

- Deputy Chair of the RCSLT
- Worked with children with severe and complex speech and language disorder for 20 years in the NHS
- Currently a Senior Clinical Lecturer at The University of Manchester



www.research.manchester.ac.uk/portal/sean.pert.html

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- What is language disorder?
- Myths about bilingual language acquisition
- Best practice



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What is language disorder?

- Children under 2 years - Very difficult to differentiate communication difficulties from typical variation
- Children aged 2-3 years
 - Minimal interaction
 - Does not display intention to communicate
 - No words
 - Minimal reaction to spoken language
 - Regression or stalling of language development

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What is language disorder?



- Children aged 3-4 years
 - At most two-word utterances
 - Child does not understand simple commands
 - Close relatives cannot understand much of child's speech

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What is language disorder?

- From 5 years
- Difficulty in telling or re-telling a coherent story
- Difficulty in understanding what is read or listened to
- Marked difficulty in following or remembering spoken instructions
- Talking a lot but very poor at engaging in reciprocal conversation
- Many instances of over-literal interpretation
 - (Bishop, Snowling, Thompson, Greenhalgh, CATALISE consortium, 2016: 9-10)

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What is language disorder?

- There is a wide body of evidence showing that growing up with more than one language is unproblematic, and can be advantageous, for many children
 - Bishop *et al.* 2016
- Bilingualism is an advantage regardless of the presence of a speech, language, or communication disorder, or feeding and swallowing difficulties.
 - Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, 2019

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Delay or disorder?

- *"...the term 'language delay' was widely rejected by our panel members as confusing and illogical"*
- *"Language problems that are still evident at 5 years and over are likely to persist..."*
- *"...there is a persisting tendency in some circles to think that intervention is not required when language impairments are associated with social disadvantage. Where these misconceptions persist, they need challenging"*
- Bishop *et al.* 2017 (1076, 1071) and Bishop *et al.* (2016: 19).

Language disorder in a bilingual context

- If a child is able to acquire their home language then they do NOT have language disorder (Bishop *et al.* 2016, 2017).
- Not being able to speak English is not a disorder
- Children of any age spend more time at home than at school
- Children with language disorder will have difficulties in both/all the languages that they speak (not just English)



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Royal College of Speech & Language Therapists Professional Standards

- Bilingualism **does not** cause, or contribute to, a speech, language or communication disorder.
- Assessment and intervention **must** always be carried out in both/all languages.
- Collaborating with professional interpreters **should not** be viewed as **optional**, and **must not** be restricted by budgetary constraints.
- Speech and language therapists **should never** recommend abandoning the home language(s) in favour of additional language learning.



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Royal College of Speech & Language Therapists Professional Standards

- Services should allocate at least **double the time** for bilingual clients and their families in order to achieve the same positive outcomes as monolingual clients, and therefore deliver an equitable service.
- It is **not the role** of the speech and language therapist to teach the majority language in the absence of a speech, language or communication disorder. This role lies with education.



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Myths about bilingualism

- Bilingualism slows down the acquisition of English
- Bilingualism causes stammers
- Bilingualism causes language disorder
- Bilingualism confuses the child



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*"(As a parent) you should never feel guilty for being bilingual;
your child would have experienced difficulties no matter which
language or languages they spoke."*

Pert and Stow, 2016

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Best practice



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Best practice



- Encourage ALL children and parents to continue to use their home language in the home environment
- Celebrate other cultures and languages spoken by children in the school
- Support home language intervention for children with language disorder
- Work alongside interpreters for informed consent and effective practice

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Best practice

• Encourage parents to speak their home language:

- It's the best model for language acquisition
- Maintains culture and develops identity
- Will **support** the acquisition of English as an additional language



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Best practice

- If you are concerned about a bilingual child's language skills, ask parents about their home language usage
- Find out which home languages are spoken. Stow and Dodd (2005) found that only 45% of bilingual children had their language correctly recorded on the referral form
- Don't delay!



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