

SOURCE:

De Houwer, Annick (2009). *Bilingual First Language Acquisition*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters, pp., 333-336.

Appendix A

Subject selection: Making sure you are dealing with BFLA

(links up with Chapter 3)

First you need to know which varieties of which two languages are involved (see also the section on 'Language models' in Chapter 4). It is not enough to know the parents' citizenship. Sometimes published reports in the literature just mention that a child's mother was Polish and her father Bulgarian, for instance. The implication seems to be that the child was raised in Bulgarian and Polish from birth. However, Polish and Bulgarian nationals speak many more languages than just Polish and Bulgarian, and not every Polish or Bulgarian national actually speaks Polish or Bulgarian. And even if the child's mother now speaks Polish to her and the child's father Bulgarian, this does not mean that this was the case right after the girl was born.

Equally important is to know who has been speaking the two languages when and to whom: You need to know about the children's linguistic environments (including input outside the home) and main patterns of language input to the children (see Chapter 4).

You need to have this information from the time the target children were born until the time you are asking questions about it. You will also need to follow up on this until the end of your study if there is any kind of longitudinal design. After all, as shown in Chapter 4, BFLA children's linguistic environments may undergo quite dramatic changes. It is especially important to know about longer periods of time that children may not have heard one of their languages.

It is crucial for a study on BFLA to know what the input patterns to a particular child were in terms of ages and times of regular exposure to each language. Having this information can help you decide whether or not to include a particular child or family in your study. Also when you want to study things that are more concerned with a bilingual family's life you will need to find out about changes in the family's residence, travel patterns and the like.

If you want to study children in a situation where most people address them in only one language (1P/1L; see Chapter 4) then you have to make sure at the start that in fact the family you might want to recruit for your study falls in that category. In case anyone in the child's close environment (one of the parents, or both parents, or other family members or caregivers) regularly speak two languages to the child you would need to find out about that, too. In any case, knowing about children's linguistic backgrounds is crucial for the later interpretation of research results (see Chapter 4). And of course, if you are setting up a comparative group study in which you want to study the effect of changes in the input over time, you will most definitely need precise information about the BFLA learning context.

There is really only one way of finding out about all the aspects mentioned above, and that is to ask parents or other members of the household you are interested in. The protocol below contains an outline of the aspects of a bilingual child and family's background that you need to know about before you can start to study BFLA. You can use this outline as a guide for talking to parents to obtain the required information. Alternatively, you could develop a written questionnaire. However, it is better to talk to the parents directly (either in person or by telephone). Generally by talking you get a better sense of what's going on, and you can ask clarification questions as needed.

One final remark here: When you talk to parents, be sensitive about their linguistic needs. Do not assume that they will be able to talk to you in the language you choose - ask them about which language they are most comfortable in, and be prepared to adjust accordingly.

If you use a written questionnaire, be sure to have available different language versions and select the one that parents prefer.

The protocol lists only the kind of information that it is crucial to collect before you start your actual study. You can add to it at will.

Protocol for obtaining information about a BFLA context *

1. Family composition

family member	date of birth	country of origin	gender	employment status
parent1				
parent2				
target child				n.a.
sibling 1				
sibling 2				
other 1: _____				
other 2: _____				

2. Current patterns of home language use

family member	speaks to parent2	speaks to parent1	speaks to target child	speaks to sibling 1/2/3	speaks to other 1/2
parent1		n.a.			
parent2	n.a.				
target child			to self: _____		
sibling 1					
sibling 2					
sibling 3					

other:_____					
other:_____					

cells here can of course be filled in with more than one language

Have there been any big changes in home language use since the target child's birth? If so, please explain.

Can you confirm that the target child has heard two languages from birth regularly?

3. Target child care history in and outside the home

in the home

	from (m,y)	until (m, y)	main caregiver(s)	average # of hours per week	language(s) spoken to child by caregiver(s)
period 1					
period 2					
period 3					
period 4					

start a different period when the child care environment clearly changed

(m, y) = month, year

outside the home

	from (m,y)	until (m, y)	main caregiver(s)	average # of hours per week	language(s) spoken to child by caregiver(s)
period 1					
period 2					
period 3					
period 4					

start a different period when the child care environment clearly changed

(m, y) = month, year

If the child was taken care of in a group setting, specify the number of other children in the group.

4. Target child residence and long term travel (> 1 week) since birth

from (month, year)	until (month, year)	residence/place visited	language(s)

please list closest city and country; which language(s) are used there in public life?

Not counting the first week of life, has the child ever been hospitalized for a period longer than a week? If so, please specify the dates (from - until).

5. Target child health

Has (s)he experienced any health problem that affects hearing, cognitive functioning and/or language use?

6. Family contact information and date that this information was received

Note: try to obtain dates rather than ages throughout. This is much easier for later analysis.

* this protocol is a modified version of a background information form that I used when I was collecting Dutch-English data in Belgium in the late 1970's. Answers to many of the questions here for one of the bilingual families I collected data on are reflected on pages 71-74 in the book where I present my study of Kate, a young bilingual girl (De Houwer 1990).