

# BILINGUALISM AND FAMILY LANGUAGE LEARNING

## BILINGVISMUL ȘI ÎNVĂȚAREA UNEI LIMBI ÎN FAMILIE

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**Abstract.** *This article aims at describing an innovative educational model based on family language learning as applied in Romania by EuroEd Foundation, Iasi, inside a European funded project under the Lifelong Learning Programme: BILFAM (Bilingual Families). The model also gives bilingualism another dimension, which is in tune with EU main objective because it best serves work mobility. Scientific literature has found out that foreign language learning before the age of 8 in the context of informal education (learning by doing) can develop native speaker competence. Moreover, research on the Narrative Format methodology (done by the psycholinguistic faculty from the Sapiientia University in Rome) has shown that the affective relationship between the adult as model and children has a great contribution to the foreign language learning process. Grand/parents with no or little foreign language competences are involved in their children's foreign language acquisition, being provided with necessary tools and strategies. The process, showing a dramatic impact on everybody's foreign language acquisition (children and adults), works well due to the fact that grand/parents spend a lot of time with their children and can follow their development throughout the years, offering them input. They will also feel encouraged to learn the language they are teaching their children. The family foreign language learning will also create a positive attitude towards multilingualism, creating better contextual conditions for multilingual education.*

**Key words:** family language learning, bilingualism, the Narrative Format

**Rezumat.** *Acest articol își propune să descrie un model educațional inovator care se bazează pe învățarea în familie și care e aplicat în România de Fundația EuroEd Iași, prin proiectul BILFAM (Bilingual Families), finanțat de către Uniunea Europeană în cadrul programului Învățare pe tot parcursul vieții. Modelul propune o nouă dimensiune a bilingvismului, care se aliniază cu un obiectiv major al Uniunii Europene pentru că servește mobilitatea forței de muncă. Literatura științifică a subliniat că învățarea unei limbi străine înainte de vârsta de 8 ani în contextul unei învățări informale poate dezvolta competențe native. Mai mult, cercetarea, care s-a bazat pe metoda Formatului Narativ (propusă de Facultatea de psiholingvistică a Universității Sapiientia Roma), a arătat importanța legăturii afective dintre adulți ca model și copii în procesul de învățare a unei limbi străine. Bunicii și părinții fără sau cu foarte reduse cunoștințe de limbă au fost implicați în acest proces dându-li-se instrumentele și strategiile necesare. Procesul, care a evidențiat schimbări*

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*importante pentru toți participanții (copii și adulți), funcționează bine datorită faptului că bunicii și părinții petrec mult timp împreună cu copiii, le sunt alături de-a lungul anilor și pot să-i ajute ori de câte ori e nevoie. La rândul lor adulții se simt încurajați să învețe limba pe care o predau copiilor lor. Învățarea în familie va promova o atitudine pozitivă față de plurilingvism, creând condiții contextuale mai bune pentru o educație plurilingvistă.*

**Cuvinte cheie:** învățarea limbilor străine în familie, bilingvism, formatul narativ

## INTRODUCTION

The project BILFAM is based on the educational model of intergenerational learning. It provides a new approach and resources to grandparents and parents with no or little foreign language competences for their direct involvement in their children's foreign language acquisition. Grandparents and parents can leverage the emotional bond to make learning fun and engaging, creating the conditions for a really enriching learning experience. There is a strong desire among parents to help their children learn a foreign language (Pirchio, 2011) as they are well aware of the instrumental role it may play in the future of the child but they lack the confidence and tools to do so. By providing the adults with necessary tools and strategies and exploiting the affective relationships (Taeschner, Traute et al. 2004) existing within the families the project will encourage grandparents and parents to learn the language they are teaching their children.

There have been 25 families per country (Italy, The UK, Slovakia, Spain and Romania) involved in the project. Each family is made up of at least one parent or grandparent and one or more children of three or six years old. At an international level the group is made up of 500 parents and 500 children.

In Romania the group has chosen English and German as the target languages. The adults had a language test at the beginning of the project which showed a low level of knowledge in the foreign language. The adults were selected due to their interest in their children's linguistic performance and their own interest in language acquisition, which is considered to be essential in their future. The families are from different walks of life but all of them have basic computer skills, have a computer and internet connection and are at least high school graduates.

## MATERIAL AND METHOD

The Narrative Format methodology, the theoretical basis of the project, relies on the natural process of acquiring one or two languages within the family context. This method has been designed by Prof Traute Taeschner of the Università Sapienza in Rome and has shown that the use of gestures, intonation, facial expressions and the affective relationship between adults and pupils is of great contribution to the foreign language learning process (Taeschner, Traute & al. 2004- p 4). It involves a series of educational strategies, activities and materials whose main aim is to recreate the conditions a child has when learning his mother tongue. Families are provided with the necessary tools and materials to make learning efficient. In its attempt to facilitate

learning the Narrative Format also facilitates good communication between the participants.

There are three key concepts at the basis of this method:

A. *Learning a foreign language should follow a similar pattern to acquiring a first language.* The child learns his mother tongue by sharing repeated experiences with the adults around them. The formats, the repeated experiences are therefore real-life situations that both parent and child share every day in a very emotional context which favours the development of non-verbal and verbal communication.

B. *Using interactive teaching/learning techniques, which follow the natural language acquisition processes.* The principle of the method stipulates that the best incentive for communication and learning lies in the emotional relationship between the child and the adult. The child starts to speak and wants to speak because he wants to communicate with the person with whom he has established an emotional relationship. This happens in the first language and by analogy can happen in the second language too.

C. *Communicative skills are at the basis for the teaching/ learning of the new language.*

The project also sheds new light upon bilingualism, which is considered to be common world wide. The human being is able to learn more than one language; it is also known that children learn languages as easily as they learn to walk. The best period in one's life for learning languages would therefore be childhood when our brain is flexible. Children can become bilingual if they are given enough input in the language and they have enough fun. Bilingual children can recognise their two languages and differentiate them from a very young age.

Bilingualism brings cognitive advantages:

- bilingual children have an early awareness and knowledge of the words, structures and sounds of their languages;
- bilingual children often learn to read earlier than others;
- bilingual children are better at learning other languages;
- bilingual children are better at switching tasks;
- bilingual children are better able to focus attention.

The disadvantages of bilingualism are outnumbered by its advantages. Some bilingual children start to speak a bit later than children who have learned one language. Bilingual children may initially have a reduced vocabulary in each of their languages, although their total vocabulary may be larger than the vocabulary of a monolingual child. Bilingual children sometimes mix both languages together (it often occurs when the child knows that s/he will be understood by the speaker because s/he is also bilingual (Pirchio, S., Taeschner, T., Sorace, A., Francese, G., Passiatore, Y. 2011- p 3).

There are usually two types of bilingual families: the family speak and understand a language and live in a society where another language is spoken and understood; some members of the family speak and understand a language and other members of the family speak and understand another language.

In both cases the child's language learning is the responsibility of the family. There are also a few schools though which encourage bilingualism. The objective of our project is this: for the first time, parents will be given accredited tools to teach their children two languages at home and with friends and by doing so the family will become a bilingual family. Being bilingual does not necessarily mean having perfect knowledge of two languages. It means being able to communicate in two languages even at different levels of competence. Children who learn two languages from birth or who learn them in succession when they already speak one language are bilingual.

Adults who learn a foreign language well are also bilingual. A bilingual family is therefore one that has daily experiences in two languages, which is exactly what our project suggests.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### **Face-to-face meetings and online tutorials**

The first face-to-face meetings with the parents concentrated on familiarising them with the project: its method, objectives, principles, innovative teaching strategies, activities and materials. This project provides families with a model of language teaching and learning called “the Narrative Format”, designed by Prof Traute Taeschner of the Università Sapienza in Rome. This method has already been tried out with great success at Nursery level, and at both Pre- and Primary School levels.

The presentations also highlighted the adult’s great influence on the children’s language development and the new role that they will have: making learning possible and successful. Some psychological aspects of the foreign language learning process as well as of bilingualism were also underlined. Theoretical aspects go hand in hand with practical issues: parents gain hands on experience in how to make a video, how to upload it on the platform or how to make a Voki.

These meetings were followed by online tutorials via a web site by which parents and tutors communicate. Parents have access to a forum and activities to be carried out with their children at home, downloadable materials, instructions, *how-to* advice and the support of a dedicated tutor. The project encourages exchanges of ideas on the site among parents and their tutors with a view to creating a community. The site becomes an excellent means of communication by which everybody can share ideas or find support and help.

**The acting out of stories** with the support of gestures and facial expressions encourages language learning through active engagement. The story is experienced with actions, gestures, facial expressions, and words. The adult and the child act various characters together at the same time. Children feel safe as long as their emotional communication with the adult remains intact and strong. The parent’s task is therefore to maintain the quality of the emotional communication with the children through eye contact, facial expressions, through warm and open body language and through gestures. Repetition also helps children understand the story. There should be no need for translation or explanations. There is a wide range of variety when it comes to repetition itself, as role playing and acting out are strengthened by the illustrated books and mini-musicals.

**Singing the song** while using gestures creates a kind of mini-musical which allows the child to listen to the story again and experience the story in the foreign language. This new experience via singing reinforces learning the new language through music and rhythm.

**The animated cartoons of the adventures of Hocus and Lotus** make use of graphic and animation techniques and introduces other language learning principles such as the temporal sequencing of events and linguistic progression.

**The e-books** of the adventures of Hocus and Lotus provide another way to listen to the stories accompanied by pictures. The e-books reinforce the vocabulary that the children have started to learn.

The Hocus and Lotus **Puppet theatre** engages children to participate in different ways according to their particular stage of development. It offers a challenging opportunity to repeat the story.

**Voki activity** challenges children to create their own avatar (with an electronic or personal voice), which can be sent to a friend or to another family in the project that is learning the same language, or it can be uploaded onto the project website.

The families can produce **a new Hocus and Lotus story**. Children are asked to organise pictures in sequence to tell a new story, by using the vocabulary and grammatical structures of the language they know creatively.

**The dinogame of the goose** is one of the best known table games, which invariably engages both adults and little ones around the table. The game challenges children to use not only their language knowledge but also their knowledge of the characters and the stories.

Spending time together and playing with Hocus and Lotus in English, French, German, Italian or Spanish, daily or several times a week, has many positive effects on both children and adults. It leads to:

- good communication and excellent family relationships; both children and adults spend quality time together which enhances their relationship: they share a wide range of happy and positive experiences together in a new language;
- high motivation: the adult feels satisfied with his child who is learning a new language which is taught by him/her;
- happy and positive memories: the child will thus gain a series of social and affective reference points within the context of shared play;
- an increase in self-esteem: children and adults learn together.

## CONCLUSIONS

The project has a direct impact on the participating families: they spend much time together speaking a foreign language learnt together. The project encourages better communication as well as closer relationships between game partners and community generally. The adult feels satisfied because he learns together with the child and motivated to act as wished.

The project provides an innovative solution as regards bilingualism. For the first time parents are given a valid instrument to facilitate their children's acquisition of two languages.

The project also motivates the learning of a foreign language by adults and children, encouraging learning which involves different generations within a family. This objective is achieved by adapting the Narrative Format method, the

Hocus and Lotus materials, to the context of the family. These materials provide a very creative and varied support and background for foreign language learning activities (video, songs, printed material, DVDs).

The model also gives bilingualism another dimension, which is in tune with EU main objective because it best serves work mobility (Commission of the European Communities, 1995).

The project aims at two different target groups, which nonetheless have many things in common: children, who are at a critical time of language learning, and their parents, who need a good motivation to learn a foreign language, very often for instrumental reasons regarding work mobility, and who find it in their wish to support their children during the process of learning and practising a foreign language.

The collected data about their attitudes and behaviour as well as the results obtained in the learning process will constitute a measure of the project's impact on the families. Apart from this direct impact we expect changes in the social context through the dissemination activities suggested by the project.

The piloting of this model is used by the Psycholinguistics Department of the University of Rome as an example of the way bilingualism works not only as a spontaneous but also as a guided phenomenon. The model underlines the role of emotions and feelings in learning foreign languages both at a young age and by adults, as well as the role of motivation in learning foreign languages. The study highlights the effect of intergenerational learning and of the consolidation of learning through teaching and practice, the role of the narrative format and of play in learning. The prototype is classic but its application in the field of languages and particularly the implications of learning on both categories makes this model a remarkable and transferable one.

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