A Survey of Language Use in Bilingual/Bicultural Families in Northern Nagano Prefecture

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My family would be called bicultural because my husband is Japanese and I am American, and bilingual because both Japanese and English are spoken every day in our home, but in actual fact, only my husband and I speak both languages. Our two sons are frankly monolingual in Japanese. This is not the way I had imagined things would be. When my older child was born, I naively thought he would learn English naturally by listening to my husband and me talking to each other in English, as we have been in the habit of doing since we met. But, after all, the language habits we have gotten into have not been conducive to encouraging our children to be bilingual, too.

I began to wonder how usual or unusual my children were compared to other children in similar situations. Are they also monolingual in Japanese? In order to find out, I sent out a “Language Survey” to some bilingual/bicultural families in Northern Nagano Prefecture. The survey consisted of three parts: FOR THE FOREIGN PARENT, FOR THE JAPANESE PARENT, and ABOUT YOUR CHILD. Fourteen families responded, so including our family, there are fifteen families in all, with a total of twenty-six children. Four families have one child each; the remaining eleven families have two children each. To families with more than one child I sent a separate set of questions for each one because there were likely to be differences in their language acquisition. Not all of the foreign parents in this area come from English-speaking countries, so the questions were written in both English and Japanese on the surveys that were mailed out. In this report, though, the questions are listed only in English. The following is a compilation of the data and the comments written by the people who responded:

The Language Survey

Part 1: FOR THE FOREIGN PARENT:

1. Which are you? (Please check)  
   Father: 3*  
   Mother: 12

*Note: This is the number of respondents.
2. What is your native language?

Danish: 1  Flemish: 1  Portuguese: 1  Tagalog: 2  
English: 7  German: 2  Spanish: 1

3. What other language(s) do you use at home?

English: 2  Japanese and English: 3  
Japanese: 10

4. What language(s) do you use when speaking to your husband/wife? To your children? (Please estimate the %)

Note: The top number in each square is the % spoken to the husband/wife; 
the bottom number is the % spoken to the children.  
* indicates a language other than English or Japanese.

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Comments made by the foreign parents:

In Belgium I speak less Japanese and more Flemish to my wife. (50%/50%)

I try not to speak any Japanese to my children, but sometimes it just comes out.

5. How long have you been in Japan?

1-5 years: 2  6-10 years: 7  11 or more years: 6

6. How would you rate your ability to speak Japanese? (Please check)

Excellent: 1  Good: 7  Fair: 4  Poor: 3

Here are some of the comments:
Speaking ability very good; reading and writing poor. (Excellent)

My Japanese has a local accent. (Good)

Grammar and using polite words makes it too difficult for me. (Fair)

When I came to Japan I always asked him to speak in Japanese, but he just wouldn’t or couldn’t. (Fair)

I only wish that there was a Japanese language school here. (Poor)

Most of the people around me are helping a lot! (Poor)

7. Do you hope that your children will learn your native language? What are your reasons? What efforts are you making?

The following hope so:

Of course I hope my children will learn German. They have both nationalities, and we don’t know in which country they’ll decide to live in the future. I only talk in German to them, otherwise they might learn some strange pronunciation from me.

Yes. Our family/relatives in Europe. Who knows what the future will bring. –Talking in German, reading German books.

As part of their general education, I want them to learn my native language, but I’m not doing anything about it at the present time.

Right now my children only speak English, my son speaks a little Japanese, but he has only learned that from TV and other Japanese children. We want it to remain this way, English in the home and Japanese outside.

I would like for them to speak some English. It may sound silly, but if they were to visit their relatives in America someday, without a translator they couldn’t understand anything at all. I try to help them with pronunciation and understanding the meaning of the words they learn, but they show little interest in the English taught at school. They seem interested in the English used on
television and in Japanese songs.

Knowing more than one language is always a plus. More opportunities are available.

Yes, I do hope that they'll learn to speak in English. I'd like to be able to communicate with them in my mother tongue, so I try as hard as possible, reading bedtime stories in English, singing nursery rhymes, etc.

Yes, for a more rounded outlook and possibly a chance to live in and study in the U. S.; not making any special effort.

Yes, I do. I want to speak with them in Spanish. When they were born I spoke in Spanish with them, but now I speak in Japanese because it is easier for me. I think this is my error and again I am speaking some Spanish with them.

Yes—so as to acquire future flexibility. Efforts at this time are kept to a minimum—games are played in English, child's requests are encouraged to be in English, occasionally English T. V. videos.

Yes, so that they will know that there are "other worlds" outside Japan, to be able to communicate with friends and relatives in the U. S., and for the possibility of higher education in another country.

The following think being bilingual is important, but not necessarily in their native language:

I don't hope so. —My son learns English. My native language is not important.

It isn't necessary for them to speak my native language, but I wish them to understand daily conversation.

No, but I hope they will learn English because I think it is more useful. Now, I'm trying to speak a little English to her.

No!!! I'm expecting her to grow up speaking both Japanese and English. My native language is unusual, and people are also using English in my home
Part 2: FOR THE JAPANESE PARENT

1. Which are you? (Please check)  
   Father: 12  Mother: 3

2. What language(s) do you use at home other than Japanese?
   - A little Dutch and English: 1  
   - Portuguese: 1  
   - English: 9  
   - None: 4

3. What language(s) do you use when speaking to your husband/wife? To your children? (Please estimate the %)

   Note: The number on top in each square is the % spoken to the husband/wife; the number on the bottom is the % spoken to the children.  
   * indicates a language other than English.

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4. How would you rate your ability to speak the native language of your husband/wife? (Please check)

   Excellent: 2  Good: 3  Fair: 2  Poor: 8

   Comments:

   But when we visit the family abroad, I make an effort to speak their language. (Poor)

   Rather difficult for me to study. (Poor)

   There are times when I speak her native language, but we can communicate well enough in English, so I don't try very hard to learn her native language. (Poor)
I cannot speak it at all. (Poor)

5. Do you think it is important for your children to grow up bilingually? What are your reasons? What efforts are you making for your children’s bilingual development?

Here are the comments the parents made:

Very important for the child to be able to speak English, but he doesn’t make an effort.

Today’s school education requires at least two languages. When we go to other countries, etc. At the moment nothing specially.

I’m not doing anything.

Of course I hope my children become bilingual, especially in English. From now on our society will become international. To live in the society, especially English is necessary. Now, my daughter is five. She understands what my wife says to her in English. If her listening comprehension can develop, it’s a good thing. As for speaking, I’m thinking of teaching her little by little in our daily life.

Now English is important in international society. I’m leaving English to my wife.

In order to grow as an international person, it’s necessary and important to know many languages well, but I’m not making any effort.

Yes, because we don’t know which country they will decide to live in and for future job opportunities. We are strictly speaking English at home and Japanese outside of the home. We go to America often.

Yes. English is an international language.

Important for communication with their mother. She always speaks English to them.

It is very important. While feeling a part of the universe, they can know the
world beyond language. They can have a wider point of view. We are making
efforts little by little in our daily life.

It would be better if they could. The limits of communication would become
wider. For now, we are not doing anything.

It is important. First, I want my son to be able to converse with my husband's
family. Second, the world is getting smaller. I want him to be a person who
can communicate anywhere and can live anywhere. My husband speaks to our
child in English. We have English books for him at home.

It is very important for them, as mixed children, to know both languages and
cultures and to know the merits of their situation. I try to interest them in
knowing what my wife and I are talking about in English and use words that
are as simple to understand as possible.

Part 3: ABOUT THE CHILDREN:

Age: 1 year: 4 6 years: 2 10 years: 1
   3 years: 3 7 years: 2 12 years: 2
   4 years: 4 8 years: 1 13 years: 1
   5 years: 3 9 years: 1 15 years: 2

1. Which is your child? (Please check)
   Boy: 15    Girl: 11

2. What is his/her mother tongue?

   For the one-year-olds: For the children from ages 3-15:
   Japanese: 2             Japanese: 20
   Don't know yet: 1        Japanese/German 1
   Baby talk, English, a    English: 1
   few Japanese words: 1

3. What other language(s) does he/she speak?
A little English: 4 German: 2
A little English and Dutch: 1 No other languages: 14
A little Japanese: 1

Note: The four one-year-olds were not included.

4. How would you describe your child? (Please check)

Monolingual in Japanese: 17
Bilingual, but better at Japanese (than English): 2
Bilingual, but better at Japanese (than German): 2
Bilingual, but better at English (than Japanese): 1
Bilingual, equally fluent in both languages: 0

Note: The four one-year-olds were not included.

The following comments were made by the parents about monolingual children:

Not so interested in other languages for the time being, maybe in the future? (age 3)

But a little interested in English or other foreign languages. (age 4)

If I use simple English to her like “Please close the door” she can understand, but she can’t speak. (age 5)

Generally speaks only Japanese. However, in a pinch has been known to communicate on a basic level in English. (age 6)

Until five years raised in U. S. and spoke only English, but forgot it in a matter of one and a half years. However, understanding is not too bad. (age 10)

About bilingual children:

Of course she speaks better Japanese because she lives here and goes to kindergarten here, and there is only one person who talks German with her, me. (age 5)

Can understand spoken English. (age 12)
In the sense that he understands *spoken* English. (age 15)

5. What kind of school is he/she attending? (Please check) What grade is he/she in?

- Not in school: 6
- Nursery School or Kindergarten: 9
- Elementary School: 8 (3 in 1st, 2 in 3rd, 1 in 4th, 2 in 6th grade)
- Junior High School: 2 (1 in 1st, 1 in 3rd year)
- High School: 1 (1st year)
- Local Japanese public or private school: 10
- Other: 0

(Since no one made comments to the contrary, it is assumed that the other children in school are attending local Japanese schools.)

Here are the comments:

Will enter a local Japanese public school when ready. (ages 1 and 3)

Staying at home with my father and mother-in-law. He does most things by himself. Very independent. (age 3)

Before she entered kindergarten she was better at German. (age 3)

Completely surrounded by Japanese—school, friends, TV, home life. (age 5)

I would say my son is not bilingual, however his understanding is not too bad. Being in a Japanese school has made him not want to be different from the other children, so he seems to fight speaking English. (age 10)

6. Is he/she receiving any formal instruction in a foreign language (other than at a Japanese public junior or senior high school) inside or outside the home?

None of the children are receiving formal instruction in English or other foreign languages outside the home; a few are getting help with their English at home.

7. How long has he/she lived in Japan?
All his/her life: 19
Came to Japan at 3 mos. old: 1
Came to Japan at 1 yr. old: 3
Came to Japan at 2 yrs. old: 1
Came to Japan at 3 yrs. old: 1
Came to Japan at 5 yrs. old: 1

8. What other countries has he/she lived in?

Brazil: 2
the Philippines: 2
the U. S. A.: 2

9. How much time has he/she spent in his/her foreign parent's home country?

1 month: 2 6 months: 2 18 months: 1
2 months: 2 11 months: 1 2 years: 1
3 months: 5 1 year: 1 3 years: 1
4 months: 2 14 months: 1 5 years: 1

Note: The six children who have never visited their foreign parent's home country are all one to four years old.

10. How would you describe his/her ability to speak the language of his/her foreign parent? (Please check.)

Excellent: 1  Good: 3  Fair: 1  Poor: 18  No answer: 3

Comment:
Too young. (age 1)

11. What language does he/she use most often when speaking to his/her:

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12. How does he/she feel about his/her foreign parent speaking a language other than Japanese in public?

Positive reactions:

I think she is enjoying both. (age 4)

If we are out together, like in a shop, she just speaks to me like at home. She has no complexes, yet. I think she almost enjoys it when nobody else can understand us. With Japanese I talk in Japanese. And I think she is quite used to me speaking English with other foreigners because we use a lot of English at home, too. As I realized, English is no secret language to her. She understands quite well what my husband and I are saying to each other. (age 5)

Doesn't mind; in fact, English seems to be interesting to her. (age 5)

I don't know how she feels about it, but sometimes she asks me if it's English that I'm speaking. (age 5)

If it's English, she says she wants to learn to speak it. (age 7)

He says he wants to learn to speak English and become friends with whoever I am talking to. (age 8)

Is not embarrassed—seems proud of the difference. Is happy when she can understand what's being said and others can't. (age 12)

He likes it, but he thinks it is too difficult. (age 15)

Neutral reactions:

Haven't noticed or reacted yet. (ages 1 and 3)

Right now they don't care much about it. (ages 3 and 4)

No reaction, just seems to take it for granted. (age 4)

Feelings about this haven't surfaced yet. Yet, I'm sure, in the future problems
will occur in this area. (age 6)

He does not seem to mind it in general. (age 10)

I can't recall using English in public in front of my children. According to my son it wouldn't bother him at all. (age 13)

Negative reactions:

They feel strange. (ages 6 and 9)

He doesn't mind if I speak English to his father, but he would mind very much if I spoke English to him in public. When he was three to four years old, other children at the nursery school called him "gaijin". He began to reject English at this time. (age 7)

It wouldn't bother him if I spoke English to a foreign person, but he wouldn't feel at ease if the person was a Japanese. (age 12)

Extremely embarrassed! (age 15)

13. When relatives or friends of the foreign parent who do not speak Japanese are around, what does your child do? (Please check)

Take part in conversations by asking and answering questions and making comments in the foreign language: 2

Answer simple questions in the foreign language when addressed: 5

Make comments and answer questions in Japanese even when addressed in the foreign language: 6

Request parent to translate for him/her: 11

Avoid talking to people who cannot speak Japanese: 5

Note: There were no answers for the one-year-olds; for the other children sometimes more than one category was checked.
Here are the comments:

Too young. (age 1)

When he cannot express himself in Japanese he uses an English word. (age 3)

She always questions me about why I'm using a lot of languages, especially when I'm talking with my Filipina friends, speaking English with foreigners, and using Japanese at home. (age 4)

Is going through a shy phase! (age 4)

Answers in Japanese if what was originally said was understood. Otherwise asks for translation. (age 5)

Case-by-case, of course. Will usually answer on a "Yes/No" basis in English. More complicated replies occur if the guest stays more than one week. (age 6)

My sons aren't fluent enough in English to take part in conversations. (ages 12 and 13)

14. Does he/she have an interest in being bilingual? What are his/her reasons? What efforts is he/she making to be bilingual?

The following children showed an interest in being bilingual:

I think she is interested in being bilingual, as a matter of fact, she wants me to teach her English. (age 4)

He is interested in making contact with other foreign people. Sometimes he is listening to tapes or singing foreign songs, etc. (age 4)

I really don't know, but sometimes she seems interested and sometimes not. (age 5)

Language and words seem to be interesting, and quite often she asks for the meaning of things in English. She watches videos in English often and expresses disappointment when an American video is only in Japanese (i.e. Disney movies). Of course, this may be reflecting my attitude. (age 5)
The interest is there. When asked what he would like to be in life, he invariably says “eigo no sensei”, which delights his parents no end. (Which he is aware of, and this could be the reason he says it.) But he—at times—is interested in English. (age 6)

She has a little interest in it. She wants to speak with me in Spanish. She is trying to learn and repeats after me when I speak in Spanish. (age 6)

I think she has an interest, but she is still young, so I am not sure. (age 7)

He has recently asked me to start a “class” for him at home. (age 7)

He wants to learn not two, but many languages. It is necessary to master one language perfectly in order to express your own will. (age 8)

I think he knows the importance of speaking English. However, he doesn’t like to study (anything) if he doesn’t have to, so he makes very little effort. (age 10)

Wants very much to be able to speak English—especially after her second cousin from the U. S. spent the summer with us. (age 12)

My child would like to be a little more fluent in English. He says to be able to speak two languages would be helpful if he decided to become a translator. His efforts leave a little to be desired. (age 13)

Has an interest—depending on the environment and what people he is associating with at the time. (age 15)

He is interested in being good at English and Dutch, and he wants to live in Belgium and England or the U. S. A. to master the languages. (age 15)

The following children did not show an interest:

Too young. (age 1)

He is not so interested now, maybe when becomes a little bit older! (age 3)

Hasn’t reacted yet. (age 3)
He doesn't have an interest. He isn't making any effort. (age 9)

He's not really interested in being bilingual. (age 12)

* * * * * * *

No family in the data exactly fits the following description; this is a composite picture of the “average” family.

The typical foreign parent is a mother with two children who has been in Japan for nine years. She speaks at least two languages, her own and Japanese, and if her native language is not English, is likely to speak three, her own, Japanese, and English. She gives herself a “B-” in Japanese, but she speaks it most of the time to her husband and children. She wants her children to be bilingual and may be trying to help them learn her native language by speaking it to them and reading books or singing songs in the language.

The typical Japanese parent is a father. He may speak to his wife in a foreign language, usually English, some of the time, but he is most likely to speak to his children only in Japanese. He does not have much confidence in his ability to speak the native language of his wife, but seven of the eight Japanese who described themselves as “poor” speakers, are married to foreigners who are not native speakers of English, so quite likely they may never have had a chance to study the language in school. The typical father also thinks bilingualism is important, but is not making any efforts to teach his children another language.

The typical child is a boy who is six years old. He has lived in Japan all his life, but has visited his foreign parent’s home country at least once. He is a monolingual speaker of Japanese, but may be able to understand some of his foreign parent’s native language. He is attending a local Japanese public or private school and is not receiving any formal instruction in a foreign language other than English classes at junior or senior high school. He speaks Japanese to everyone in the family, but doesn’t seem to mind when his foreign parent speaks a language other than Japanese in public. When he is around relatives or friends who cannot speak Japanese, he is most likely to ask his parent for a translation. He has an interest in foreign languages, but is not making any special effort to learn one.

Another survey of the linguistic environments of families of mixed marriages in Japan has been done by Yamamoto. In her survey, one of the parents was a native speaker of English, and the other was a native speaker of Japanese. Fifty-five families responded to her survey, and of these eleven could be considered “successful”, in that children
over four years old in these families almost always spoke English with the English-speaking parent. She found that there were three significant factors for success: first, and most important, was the English-speaking parent always addressing the child in English, second, siblings speaking English to each other, and third, the child attending a school in which English is the medium of instruction.

The following graph shows the answers given to the questions in the survey which I made in Northern Nagano Prefecture on the amount (%) of foreign language spoken to the husband/wife and to the children by the parents:

Among the fifteen families, there are five, Nos. 3, 4, 8, 11, and 14, in which the foreign parent speaks primarily his/her native language or English, to the children. Among these five, there are two different types of bilingual family. Two families, Nos. 3 and 11 in the lower right-hand corner of the graph, are “One Parent/One Language” families, defined by Harding and Riley as follows:

Parents: The parents have different native languages: each parent has some degree of competence in the other's language.

Community: The language of one of the parents is the dominant language of the community.
Strategy: The parents each speak their own language to the child from birth.

The child in Family No. 3 speaks both languages. The younger child in Family No. 11 is not old enough to speak, but seems to understand the foreign language. The older child in Family No. 11 speaks a mixture of Japanese and the foreign language.

Family No. 8, in the upper right-hand corner of the graph, is an "Inside Language/Outside Language" family. According to Harding and Riley, this means that:

Parents: The parents have different native languages.

Community: The language of one of the parents is the dominant language of the community.

Strategy: Both parents speak the non-dominant language to the child, who is fully exposed to the dominant language when outside the home and in particular when he/she starts nursery school.

This family is making a disciplined effort to establish English as the mother tongue. Their children are not yet in school. The older child speaks hardly any Japanese, and the younger child speaks baby talk in the foreign language.

Families No. 4 and 14, towards the upper right of the graph, are mixtures of the two types. Family No. 4 is a trilingual family in which the foreign parent speaks one foreign language to her husband, another to her children, and some Japanese to both at home. Outside the home, she uses Japanese. The Japanese parent speaks only Japanese to the children, but usually speaks English to his wife. The younger child in this family is still too young to speak, but the older child speaks Japanese and one of the foreign languages and seems to have a passive knowledge of the other. In Family No. 14, the foreign parent speaks mostly English to his wife and child. His wife speaks some English to him and a little bit to their child. The child speaks Japanese, but when necessary can communicate on a basic level in English if he feels comfortable with the person.

According to Harding and Riley and the studies they have reviewed of families all over the world, both types of family, "One Parent/One Language" and "Inside Language/Outside Language", can successfully raise bilingual children. What is a "successful" bilingual family? It is one in which the children have grown up to be normal, adjusted people, who know more than one language, but have not been disturbed by the experience. It does not mean that the children are necessarily able to speak the two, or more, languages equally well at any given time. Bilingualism itself is not a static condition, so due to circumstances, one of the languages is bound
to develop faster and further.

All of the children in the five families mentioned above are young, from one to
six years old, but if the parents continue in the way they have started, my guess is
that they have the best chance of raising bilingual children.

The majority of the families are clustered in the lower left-hand corner of the
graph around zero, meaning that most of the children in mixed families in this area
are getting almost no foreign language input. It is no wonder that so many are
monolingual in Japanese. There are three families scattered around them, No. 5, 6,
and 10, in which some foreign language is used, but no more than 25% of the time
to the children. All of the older children, who are at least in elementary school, are
in this quadrant. In my “Language Survey” I asked only about language use at the
present time. It is quite possible that some of these families may have started out
differently, with much more foreign language input from the foreign parent when
the children were small. It is also quite possible that this may have declined as the
foreign parent became more proficient in Japanese or as social pressure on the children
to speak Japanese increased after the children entered elementary school. Japanese
society does not nurture people who are “different”, so the children, especially the
ones who resemble the foreign parent, may have strongly wanted to be like the other
children, at least with respect to language. The parents may have just given up
what seemed like an uphill struggle rather than cause the child more stress.

Language stress has been a problem in our family, No. 15 in the upper left-hand
corner of the graph, especially for my older child. When he was a baby I spoke mostly
English to him, but the amount gradually decreased as he learned to speak and began
to favor Japanese. He looks more like me than like his father, so when he entered
nursery school at the age of three, he was called “gaijin” by some of the children
there. He began to strongly reject English at this time, and I stopped using it when
speaking to him altogether. This is when I settled into the pattern of speaking Eng­
lish to my husband and Japanese to my children. This has continued until recently,
when I became really concerned about the long-term effects of this pattern. It has
been insufficient for developing even an ability to understand English and is not to
be recommended for any family that wishes to raise bilingual children. I discovered
this when I took my older child with me to the U.S. for five weeks when he was
six years old. He was very frustrated and upset by his lack of ability to communicate
and declared that he wanted nothing more to do with English. It was not until
recently, more than a year after the trip, that his attitude began to change. He entered
first grade and began to understand the concept of “studying”. He even asked me
to have an English "class" for him at home. My younger child, who does not look like me and has never been to a foreign country has not had the same negative feelings about English.

Mixed families without a doubt make up a very small percentage of the total population of Japan. Yamamoto made some very important points about the difficulties of raising bilingual children in this situation:

"If a minority population is large enough, it is likely that a stable and supportive community will be established, allowing the frequent interaction by which the linguistic and cultural heritage can be maintained and transmitted on to the children. The community may build schools for its children or organize social activities to encourage and support itself. However, this degree of exposure may be difficult to attain if the minority group population is very small or geographically scattered around the host country. In that case, the successful transmission of the minority heritage is heavily dependent on individual endeavor." (p. 18)

"If society cannot offer a bilingual environment, this requirement is placed on the parents' shoulders." (p. 20)

The most basic factor for raising bilingual children is for the foreign parent to always speak to the child in the foreign language. This is something we can do in Northern Nagano Prefecture. However, one of Yamamoto's secondary factors, sending the child to a school in which English or another foreign language is the medium of instruction, is only possible in those parts of Japan where the foreign population is large enough to support international schools, not in Nagano. Apparently, none of the parents in my survey think the language problem is important enough to warrant sending their children away to boarding schools because all of the children who are in school are attending local Japanese public or private schools. There may even be people who worry that children who go to international schools may not learn to write Chinese characters properly, which would be a big disadvantage for the children who plan to stay here permanently. None of the parents mentioned wanting to send their children to foreign language-medium schools now, but some did list the opportunity to study abroad as a potential benefit of being bilingual. In fact, the only parent who made a comment about schools regretted that there were none in Nagano where foreigners could study Japanese. Only the oldest child, who is in the first year of high school, expressed a desire to live in another country to (presumably study and) master the language.

What is a foreign parent who wishes his/her child to be bilingual to do? First, and foremost, increase the amount of foreign language used directly to the child. In my family I am doing this by using TPR techniques (Asher, 1986) in our daily life
at home, that is, I use gestures with my words and make sure that the meaning is as clear as possible from the context. My children enjoy this “game” and are proud of themselves when they figure out what I am telling them. I do not require them to repeat after me, but they often do anyway. Recently the amount of English I speak to them has gone up. Reading books, singing songs, playing games, watching videos, and other activities mentioned by the parents in the survey are also excellent. The point is that we need to be patient and creative and provide our children with an atmosphere that is as rich in the foreign language as possible.

References


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