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## The Voice of Life

In the previous section, we asked the question that we often hear when we are in schools working with teachers and administrators: What is bilingual education? However, we have noticed that often in the grocery store or on a plane, we hear a different type of question. Sometimes people ask questions about bilingual education, and they don't really want to hear our answer. They want to tell us that this is America, and kids need to learn English. Incidentally, the answer to that is: Yes, you're right, yup, sí, or you betcha.

In this section, The Voice of Life, our intention is to tell stories because sometimes the answers we use in schools, don't work as well in life - at least, not in our lives. For example, when Krashen (1993) speaks of comprehensible input and low affective filter in the language acquisition process, teachers "get it." However, not everyone understands comprehensible input and low affective filter, much less first and second language acquisition. The following story is one we have used with our relatives and friends, as they struggle to understand language acquisition, which is the foundation of bilingual education. These are people who truly wanted to understand how one "gets" (acquires) a language.

First, a disclaimer: This story is very gender centric. Remember, these stories are based on our lived experiences. We know about being a mom, and we don't know about being a dad. In addition, we needed an *m* word. Thus, in the following story, when we say "Mama," please know that we mean *everyone* -- women and men.

As we write this, we cannot help but reflect on the early days of gender-free language, when women gently mentioned that *he* or *him* didn't seem to include us, but we were told not to worry because, "Of course, *he* or *him* meant women, too." Men, when we say "mamas," in what follows, we want you to think, "papas." To bring us back to focus, this story is not about *he*, *him*, *she*, or *her*. It is about something we all have in common: first language acquisition.

### Mamas, Meaning, and Motivation

Families around the world know about first language acquisition. Apparently, you don't need a Ph. D., an ESL certificate, nor a teacher credential to understand language acquisition. Most kids everywhere grow up talking. Someone, somewhere must be doing something right. They are. Families do what is necessary for language acquisition.

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Envision a small baby you know very well. Think about what happens when that baby comes home to begin life with her new family. I know exactly what happened when I brought Dawn and Bo home from the hospital: I started to talk meaningfully and lovingly with them: "Do you want your baba? Did you take a good nap? You are such a love-bug. Are you hungry? Oh, poor baby, you have a dirty diaper. Do you want to cuddle? Oh, look at that face." Dawn and Bo, didn't have to do anything; I didn't expect anything, I just kept sending loving, meaningful messages. I knew (and so do families everywhere) that if I just kept speaking in this manner, sooner or later, Dawn and Bo would begin to understand and then respond.

Now, imagine that the baby you are thinking about is between one and two years of age. Probably, the baby is beginning to respond physically and even verbally. I know what we did when this happened with Dawn and Bo: We continued to talk and model and show, and we began to celebrate every response -- no matter how small.

When I said, "See the light?" if Dawn or Bo looked toward the light, I was delighted with their understanding. If I said, "Here comes Daddy," and they ran to the door, I was thrilled that they understood. The happier I was about each incremental bit of understanding, the more motivated Dawn and Bo were. Mamas around the world do exactly as I did: They provide meaning in a loving way that motivates their children. Papas, grandparents, and caregivers do the very same thing, and most children eventually start to speak -- each child at his or her own rate. Some speak earlier. Some speak later. But most start to speak and understand. Language acquisition is very natural.

Now imagine that this child is between two and three years old. She is probably beginning to respond more rapidly. Words come one by one, and we are thrilled. I used to run to the baby book and record and date each new word as it developed. I celebrated. I called my friends and told them about the new words. I kept talking in meaningful ways, and I hope in a loving way, too.

When words started to come two by two, I was sure I had birthed gifted children. When Dawn and Bo began to string nouns together, I didn't worry about noun pileups. I just focused on the meaning and their understanding. Soon they knew too many words, and I couldn't record them in the baby books fast enough. When language starts to emerge, it comes first as a dribble, and then it is a raging river.

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Comprehensible input and low affective filter are fundamental to language acquisition. We have known a lot of families in our lives, and they all seem to know this and they are all mostly doing it right because the kids are growing up with language. It is only when the kids go to school that we stop doing what we know works.

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First, think about what families do right. In the first year, they know that it is inappropriate to expect their child to speak. They give their babies lots of time to acquire language naturally. If you are an adult second language learner, you appreciate how long it takes to acquire a language. In the first year, families don't give vocabulary and comprehension tests; families don't worry about errors in language. Families give meaningful messages; families give time; and families give love.

In the second year, families are thrilled which physical responses that indicate that the child understands; "yes" and even "no" become benchmarks in a family life. Individual sounds that mean something specific send all the family members into action to do whatever the 2-year old is indicating. Families respond to the 2-year old's initial sounds. The 2-year old can see that language has purpose; language has power.

In the third year, families love to hear the natural progression of more and more words and more and more complex groups of words. Families respond appropriately to the child's language, and families are thrilled when the child responds appropriately to more complex sentences.

Families don't give language and comprehension tests; families don't expect perfect pronunciation at first -- in fact, many are thrilled with the creative use of sounds. Families don't send their babies off to special classes the minute a new word is used incorrectly. Families know that language is an individual developmental process. I remember feeling so nostalgic when Bo's /r/ sound finally developed. For of his early years, I had loved the sound of his childlike speech without that bothersome /r/ sound.

Meaning, meaning, meaning is what bilingual education is all about. First language acquisition takes place when mamas provide meaning, and kids are motivated to speak. Krashen (1993) tells a similar story when he works with teachers: He says that students need comprehensible input (a.k.a., meaning) with a low affective filter (a.k.a., mamas and motivation). A low affective filter refers to the state of ease and comfort of the language learner. Babies learning their first language generally have low affective filters during their language acquisition. They are comfortable, and the emphasis is on providing meaning and love. A high affective filter refers to the anxiety produced in stressful situations. A high affective filter in the classroom inhibits language acquisition because people do not acquire languages as well in high-stress situations. If you understand this story, you know a lot about bilingual education, which is second language acquisition-not first language acquisition. However, there are some easy comparisons, which will hopefully help you ponder bilingual education.