

Learning a second language does not pose any particular problems for a child with general learning disabilities, although the level achieved in both languages may be lower than that of peers. In fact, the stimulus of acquiring another language, with alternate labels for objects and concepts, seems to help the child progress in both languages. The careful grading of language by the teacher, the repetition of key phrases and vocabulary, the use of visual cues and stimuli, the emphasis on learning through activities, all enable the child to make good progress in the second language alongside the peer group.

The instance where there may be difficulty is when a child has a specific language related disorder (see p. 126). A child who has problems 'tuning into' or processing language may find it difficult to cope with a class where the curriculum is delivered through the medium of a second language. It may not be easy to 'pick up' the second language and the child may be shut out of classroom interaction. A preferable option for such a child might be to attend a school where the curriculum is delivered mainly through the medium of the first language, and the second language is presented only in set periods.

One situation which language and speech therapists encounter is minority language parents who speak the majority language to their children. Sometimes when a child has learning difficulties, parents believe two languages are an extra burden and adopt the useful majority language. This can also happen when the child has no particular problem, but the parents decide from the child's birth to promote the majority language to 'get a good start in life'. The result is that the child is excluded from the interaction between parents and other family and community members.

Since the parents are not native majority language speakers, sometimes the model they offer their child is impoverished and deficient. Thus the child grows up, not advantaged but deprived. A child with learning disabilities is further disadvantaged. It seems preferable, wherever possible, for parents to speak their own language to their child. If acquisition of that first language presents problems, language and speech therapy can help. The second language can be built upon the strong foundations of the first.

Many modern language and speech therapists now refute the suggestion that bilingualism is a burden, even for individuals with congenital or acquired language disabilities. Bilingualism is simply a dimension in life, to be taken into account when working with people with different kinds of language disabilities. The ability to speak two languages is a privilege and resource that should be denied to no one.

### Further Reading

Baca, L.M. and Cervantes, H.T. (1998) *The Bilingual Special Education Interface* (3rd edn). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.