

The challenge of isolation in immigrant family language maintenance in regional Australia

Elizabeth M. Ellis,

Linguistics, School of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, University of New England, Australia.

Margaret Sims,

School of Education, University of New England, New South Wales, Australia.

Vicki Knox

Linguistics, School of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, University of New England, Australia.

Abstract

The critical factor determining whether children of immigrants become bilingual is strong family and community support for, and use of, the home language(s) alongside English (Pauwels, 2005). It is well accepted that children of immigrant parents often undergo language shift to English (Clyne & Kipp, 1996), that bilingualism is a cognitive and social asset to children (Wong Fillmore, 2000) and that maintaining “potential for belonging” (Bilbatua & Ellis, 2011) is a powerful motivator for families to maintain the home language. As yet, however, we know little about how bilingual families in isolated circumstances in regional Australia manage the task of passing on their home language in the absence of a co-located speech community.

This paper focuses on the challenges and impacts associated with isolation for plurilingual families in small towns in regional Australia. In this paper, selected findings are presented from a larger research project (the base study, titled ‘Bilingualism in the Bush’) tracking the experiences of plurilingual families with pre-school-aged children in three regional towns over a three-year period. This paper explores each family’s language goals, aspirations, beliefs and practices. Findings reported here are that families struggle, facing extra pressures brought on by isolation from other speakers of the home language, that extended family relationships, often crucial to bilingual acquisition, can be problematic and not necessarily available for language support, and that the demands of work and study exacerbate the problems of isolation.

Introduction: Linguistic diversity beyond the metropolis

It is well known that Australia is one of the most urbanised nations on earth, with some 70% of the population living in its eight capital cities (ABS, 2016). Populations outside the major

cities are small and widely dispersed over a large geographic area, and hence additional language learning, use and maintenance in these contexts present additional challenges to those encountered in major urban centres. There are shared concerns around the dominance of the idea of the metropolis in conceptions of, and research on, the languages of immigrants and refugees as well as those of learning additional languages (Ellis et al 2014) and the implications of this dominance in understandings of the challenges faced by plurilingual families in rural and regional areas. One such concern in these areas is that people have lower access to the educational, health and cultural resources, as well as local communication in home languages (HLs), that support the maintenance of language diversity than do those in urban areas (Karidakis & Arunachalam, 2016). Additionally, in rural and regional areas, social, health and community services are less well-versed in accommodating cultural and linguistic diversity, both at a systemic level and an individual level. Language resources catering to children's needs are scarce in regional areas and are naturally allocated to the areas with the highest concentration of speakers and greatest need – the cities – and in early childhood settings teachers may have uninformed attitudes toward home languages, have less experience and receive less support in meeting the needs of children from other language backgrounds. As a consequence “[s]ome migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds experience significant social disadvantage and exclusion in rural areas” (DIAC, 2010, p. vi), and the lack of support services means that there will almost inevitably be an intergenerational shift to English, to Australia's long-term detriment.

Despite the tendency of much of the literature over the last few decades to use the term “bilingual children”, we (the researchers) are now working with the concept of “plurilingualism” as being more appropriate to the actual language use and goals of families, as is the case in the present study. The term “bilingual” has always been rather problematic, since in common lay parlance it is understood to mean “native-like proficiency in two languages” (Bloomfield, 1933, p. 56), despite decades of linguistic research finding that such a state is relatively rare, and that most people who are bilingual use their languages in different but complementary ways – with proficiency and lexicon varying accordingly. Plurilingualism is “the repertoire of varieties of language which many individuals use, and ... therefore the opposite of monolingualism; it includes the... ‘first language’ and any number of other languages or varieties” (Byram, 2007). The term “plurilingual” acknowledges that speakers have different abilities in their various languages, according to their social uses. People who are plurilingual may not possess full proficiency in a language, but still view it as an enriching component of their overall linguistic repertoire (Lin, 2013, p. 522). Plurilingualism acknowledges that language competence is fluid and dynamic; that it increases with use, or with involvement in new domains; that it retreats with lack of use, is open to regeneration, and is always subject to the social and personal demands of the speaker's community. It does not demand “perfection” (as if such a state could exist) and it enables the speaker to be framed as a competent speaker of an additional language rather than as a failed native speaker.

While recent articles on bilingualism and plurilingualism in Australia still refer to a widespread “monolingual mindset” (Clyne, 2008; Eisenclas & Schalley, 2017) and monolingual ideologies (Piller, 2001; Ellis, Gogolin, & Clyne, 2010), it is contended that, additionally, “the

bush”¹ is the target of a range of pervasive myths: namely, that there is a linguistic monoculture outside the cities; that immigrants and refugees reside only in urban areas; that multiculturalism is an urban phenomenon, and that “the bush” is static, culturally conservative and overwhelmingly of English-speaking Anglo descent. The logical inference to be drawn from these myths is that there is little need for, or point in attempting, language maintenance in regional Australia and this perception is responsible for shaping policy and service delivery in relation to linguistic support.

Yet, in reality regional Australia has always featured linguistic and cultural diversity (Ozolins, 1993; Clyne, 2005). The Federal Government increasingly provides incentives for migrants and refugees to settle outside the cities, such as the State Specific Regional Migration (SSRM) Program. The top ten migrant source countries in 2013–2014 were India, PRC, UK, Philippines, Pakistan, Ireland, Vietnam, South Africa, Nepal and Malaysia. Migrants from these and other countries who settle in regional Australia may wish to maintain their home languages and pass them on to their children. However, without linguistic support, and as Australian Census data shows in contrast to metropolitan areas, outer and inner-regional areas of Australia are the least successful in maintaining their community languages (Karidikis & Arunachalam, 2016).

The concept of “speech community” is a long-standing one in sociolinguistics, referring to people who share a language or dialect or way of speaking. Morgan (2004) traces its history to Bloomfield’s definition: “[a] group of people who use the same set of signals is a *speech-community*” (1933, p. 29). We argue that the concept of “speech community” in the more general sense of “a group of people who speak the same language or dialect” is called upon in the literature on home language maintenance as a desirable and necessary aid in the attempts of a family (narrowly defined) to pass their home language on to their children. However, this use of the term tends to assume that such a community is physically co-located, accessible, friendly, known, visible and harmonious. It is well-recognised that children *need* a critical mass of speakers with whom to interact in the language to maintain it (Pauwels, 2005). That critical mass does not exist in “the bush”, where there is often no co-located speech community available and parents face an uphill battle in family language maintenance. They may be the only speakers of their language and the only source of minority language or home language input for their children (De Houwer, 2009). Language shift from the home language to English, the dominant language, is well-documented even where a significant speech community does exist (Clyne & Kipp, 1996). Peer pressure, as well as lack of opportunity to speak the home language, contribute to a shift to English, particularly once children start school and become exposed to more English influence.

It is not only the quantity of language to which children are exposed that is crucial, but also the *quality* and *range* of input (Place & Hoff, 2011). Here the concept of the “speech community”, and the well-established “ethnic infrastructure” (Karidikis & Arunachalam, 2016) that it brings (e.g. child care in the home language, community language schools, religious gatherings, ethnic

¹ ‘The bush’ is a long-standing colloquial term to denote any part of Australia outside a major city or town. As well as being a description of sparsely-populated and often arid regions, the term has a cultural and mythical resonance that dates from colonial settlement.

media and shops), becomes salient, for it is assumed that speakers outside the immediate household in which the child lives will be able to provide broader examples of home language use, help socialise the child into relevant cultural and linguistic practices, and offer the opportunity for acquiring lexicogrammatical ways of indexing social relationships. However, in the more challenging circumstances in rural and regional Australia these cosy assumptions fall down when families live in isolation with few, if any, speakers of their language or variety in physical proximity. For example, if a Spanish-speaking child only ever interacts with her mother in Spanish, she will acquire the less formal ‘*tu* [you]’ form of verbs but not necessarily the formal ‘*usted*’ [polite ‘you’] form which might be expected outside the family. Compounding this isolation, the parents in these families are often in exogamous relationships making language transmission even harder (Schüpbach, 2009; Yates & Terraschke, 2013), and putting more pressure on the home language parent to provide language input to the children. In these situations, family language policy (FLP) becomes absolutely critical to the development of plurilingualism (King & Fogle, 2006; De Houwer, 2007).

The family language policy approach “takes into account what families actually do with language in day-to-day interactions; their beliefs and ideologies about language and language use; and their goals and efforts to shape language use and learning outcomes” (King, Fogle, & Logan-Terry, 2008, p. 909). Parents in exogamous relationships often adopt a FLP which uses a “one parent – one language” (OPOL) approach (Barron-Hauwaert, 2004), however, it is acknowledged that there are a multitude of different individual circumstances and attitudes to language which abound in families attempting to pass on their languages to their children (De Houwer, 2009). The individual parent’s plurilingual language portfolio, comprising their own language experiences growing up and intra-familial attitudes to languages (Sims, Ellis & Knox, 2017), can influence their ideologies and expectations in developing their own family language policy. Coupled with this are the environmental circumstances in which they find themselves, and as Yates & Terrasche (2013, p. 109) note, “even when both parents are fully committed ... the role of context is crucial and the obstacles are many, particularly in English-dominant environments”. Thus, in practice, FLP strategies, of which there are many (Spolsky, 2004; Piller, 2001), may be experimented with in order to find the one that works best in each family’s unique situation.

Studies of Australian family language maintenance have been of three main kinds. Firstly, large-scale survey studies of language shift from minority to the majority language, often using census data (e.g. Clyne, 2005; Clyne & Kipp, 1996; Karidakis & Arunachalam, 2016). These studies show important societal patterns but cannot reflect the richness of family language dynamics. Secondly, studies of the language dynamics of particular large speech communities (e.g. Afrikaans – Hatoss, Rensburg and Starks, 2011, and Sudanese – Hatoss 2012). Thirdly, in-depth case studies of an individual family where children are growing up with two or more languages (e.g. Saunders, 1988; Rubino, 2014). Virtually all of this literature, to our knowledge, relates to metropolitan contexts, or semi-urban contexts close to metropolitan centres, and large speech communities. We know much less about family language transmission in smaller, lesser-spoken languages (Kirsch, 2012), and almost nothing about families in isolated regional areas speaking majority or minority languages. Much of the excellent published advice to parents about raising children who are bilingual (Baker, 2014; Harding-Esch & Riley, 2003;

Pearson, 2008) is written from European or North American perspectives, (a more wide-ranging exception is Cunningham, 2011), and much of it features middle-class, literate families in urban environments. Many studies are undertaken in the families of linguists, who tend to be more informed about children's language development and about options for family language maintenance than non-linguists. As a result, there has been a call by researchers for more information on FLP (Spolsky, 2004) and micro-level longitudinal studies of language transmission within bilingual and multilingual families (Schüpbach, 2009).

This article focuses on the challenges and impacts associated with isolation for plurilingual families in regional Australia. The data presents selected findings from a larger research project (Bilingualism in the Bush) which identifies a uniquely under-researched sector of the population: immigrant families of diverse language backgrounds living in regional areas where schools and services have traditionally less experience with culturally and linguistically diverse families, and where lack of a sizeable speech community means that families have little support, and must find innovative ways to maintain home language. In order for that support to be provided in the future, researchers need to better understand the complexity of families' practices and the difficulties they face in their goal of family plurilingualism. An overview of the research project is presented below followed by the selected findings.

Background to the major study

The major research project (the base study) grew out of the researchers' community work involving workshops for bilingual parents on maintaining home language, in-service training for early childhood educators and a pilot study investigating parents' motivations for raising bilingual children in regional Australia (Sims & Ellis, 2014). This work suggested that families were keen for children to acquire and maintain their home language even in the absence of a co-located speech community and that further in-depth investigation was warranted to provide information for other families in similar situations and to inform better-targeted language support.

The overall aim of the base study was to document the experiences of plurilingual families in regional Australia ("the bush") who are attempting to pass their home language on to children in the absence of others who speak the same language in their immediate physical environment. Through multiple longitudinal case studies of families of diverse language backgrounds the base study tracked children's plurilingual language use before and after the critical point of entry into English-dominant childcare, preschool and school system, gathering fine-grained data on intra-family bilingual discourse and parental views and aspirations. In this paper, we focus on four aspects of the challenges of isolation as the families encounter them: expectations coming from a multilingual community; extended family contact and visits to the home country; the impact of being the only source of home language input; and the exigencies of work and study.

Location and Participants

The base study was conducted from May 2014–Feb 2017 and focused on three towns in New South Wales (NSW), Australia, which range from 280–480 kms from their nearest major city. The three towns are all situated in a large inland region of NSW, classified for census purposes as outer-regional (Baxter, Gray, & Hayes, 2011). The two larger towns, however, while situated in the outer-regional area are themselves classified as inner-regional pockets within this larger area, due to the services available in these towns. The three towns have different demographic profiles, and the short descriptions provided below give a sense of “the bush” where our target families are pursuing plurilingual family policies.

- Town A (pop. 29,449) (ABS, 2016) is a University town, featuring a mobile, well-educated, culturally diverse community alongside a long-established farming and business community.
- Town B (pop. 59,663) (ABS, 2016) is focused on farming, light industry and small business. It is traditionally Anglo-Australian but is actively attracting skilled migrants from a range of cultural backgrounds.
- Town C (pop. 13,159) (ABS, 2016) is the most remote and has a focus on sheep, wheat and cotton. It features great diversity in socio-economic status from wealthy graziers to low-skilled workers. There is a large Aboriginal population. Coal seam gas and mining are attracting skilled migrants.

Families were recruited who met the following criteria:

1. One or both parents were born overseas and speak a home language other than English;
2. Parents are committed to bringing up child/ren speaking the home language as well as English;
3. At least one of the parents speaks English sufficiently well to participate in interviews about language practices;
4. One or more children are of pre-school age *and* of an age to produce oral language (2–4).

Due to criterion 2 all of the families in the project could be described as having a positive attitude to bilingualism.

Nine families completed all cycles up to the completion of the project. Families were distributed as follows: Town A – 4; Town B – 3; Town C – 2.

Data-gathering methods

The research is informed by a social constructivist epistemology whereby it is suggested that “parents construct their own understandings of plurilingualism based on their own experiences with language” (Sims et al., 2017, p. 779). The study was conceived as a multiple case-study design, focusing on the gathering of longitudinal qualitative data from multiple sources, consistent with best practice in seeking to understand complex and situated social practices (Lanza, 2007; Talmy, 2010). There was a total of 4–5 cycles of data collection depending on

when each family was recruited. Three research assistants (RAs) were employed, one in each town, to conduct the cycles. On the first visit, prior to commencing the data collection cycles, the RA informed the family about the goals of the research project and conducted a “baseline interview” which sought comprehensive information on family demographics, family language planning goals, language attitudes, language use within the family, strategies for home language maintenance, home language contact outside of the family and community support.

The cycles were approximately six months apart with some flexibility in recognition of family needs (for example a visit to one of the parents’ home country meant for one family a larger gap between two cycles). After each cycle was completed, the researchers reviewed the data and from the information gathered, provided guidance to the RAs on what questions to ask or follow-up on in the subsequent cycle. Advice was also provided regarding the RAs interviewing techniques. This was done to provide quality control and consistency in data collection across the three towns.

Video elicitation was used as a data-gathering method. The RA supplied the families with a digital video recorder and explained how to use it. Families were asked to record one or more short segments (2 to 3 minutes long) of family language interaction involving the target age children in between successive visits within each cycle. Guidelines were given, with examples, of the type of interaction sought, such as over dinnertime, discussing homework, playing games, reading stories, bedtime routines etc.

During each cycle the RA viewed video-recordings *with* the family, reflecting on what was happening in the videos and discussing this with them. The discussion was recorded. This allowed researchers to see what actually happened in language interactions between family members rather than relying solely on parents’ reports and narratives. This iterative practice generates yet more useful data, as the respondent provides insights into how s/he interprets the data (Ellis, Brooks & Edwards, 2010).

Each cycle included three visits to the family, (not including the “baseline interview” in the first cycle). Each visit featured a semi-structured interview with the principal carer, other partner if available and any other adults in the household. Questions sought details on what languages were being used in the home, changes in the adults’ or target children’s language practices, progress towards family language goals, problems and hindrances, use of technology and social media to increase contact with home language, any other strategies in use, progress with literacy goals, contact with service providers, childcare workers or teachers and any issues that arose regarding the home language. All interviews were audio-recorded. The RA kept a reflective journal of experiences, insights and tentative findings after each visit. This data assisted the team to keep track of growing amounts of data, and provided another layer of insights to discuss after each cycle. Families were also asked to keep reflective journals.

Data analysis

Baseline interviews were transcribed in detail. Prior to full transcription, further interviews were written up as “notes” by the RA with salient quotes transcribed in detail. Any quotes to be used by researchers were cross-checked in the source data. The software program ELAN was used to segment and comment on video recordings. Recordings, transcriptions, videos,

audio files and journals were all uploaded to the secure data storage system known as Intersect, from where the researchers were able to download and work on individual files for analysis. To manage the huge amount of data “descriptive tables” were developed, time-stamping relevant sections in interviews, video segments and journals based on themes which emerged following iterative readings of the baseline interviews. A profile of each family was constructed, summarising their demographic situation, family language policy and other relevant information. The descriptive tables enabled researchers to find information quickly and efficiently in the source data and to compare and contrast information across the data collection methods and across the nine families.

The study utilised visual timeline analysis which “allows a simultaneous overview of multiple aspects of development over time” (Tasker, 2018, p. 449) to gather information on the children’s various exposure to the home language and English over time. Two timelines were developed from the time the target children were born up until the end of the project: the first timeline involved following the child’s contact with the home language through extended family and visits to the home country; the second timeline illustrated children’s time spent in English-only childcare or early child care centres and away from the input of the home language speaker/s.

Selected findings

Family language profiles and policies

Table 1 gives the language profiles of the families, showing the languages spoken by each parent, the language(s) parents use to each other, whether the parents are linguistically exogamous or endogamous, and the language(s) parents use in speaking to the child(ren). Table 1 also indicates the Family Language Policies (FLP) adopted by the families in this study. The FLPs described here are adapted from Piller (2001) and Barron-Hauwaert (2004):

OPOL – ML: Home language is spoken by one parent, English by the other, to the children both inside and outside the home regardless of English speakers being present. Parents communicate in English.

OPOL – Mixed: A mostly OPOL approach but English is used in family situations and the HL parent mostly uses the HL but sometimes uses English with the children. English generally spoken outside the home.

Trilingual strategy: The parents speak different home languages and communicate in English. They speak their HL to the children as well as English in the home. English spoken outside the home.

Time and Place strategy: At certain times or in certain circumstances the HL is spoken by the whole family (e.g. some families designate a special day in the week when only HL is spoken, or only HL is spoken when grandparents are visiting).

Table 1: Family language profiles

	Mother (M)		Father (F)		Parents linguistic relationship	Main family language policy adopted	Parents to each other	Parents to children
	Home languages	Other language	Home languages	Other languages				
TOWN A FAM 1 (A1)	Spanish English	French	English	<i>Spanish*</i>	Exogamous	OPOL – ML Trilingual	English	(M) Spanish, French (F) English
TOWN A FAM 2 (A2)	English	<i>German</i>	German English		Exogamous	OPOL – Mixed Time & Place	English	(F) German, English (M) English
TOWN A FAM 3 (A3)	English	Hebrew Danish	Hebrew English		Exogamous	OPOL – Mixed Time & Place	English	(F) Hebrew, English (M) English, Hebrew
TOWN A FAM 4 (A4)	Amharic <i>English</i>	Arabic	Amharic Tigrinya English	Arabic	Endogamous	No real FLP	Amharic English	(F) Amharic, English (M) Amharic, English
TOWN B FAM 1 (B1)	Dutch English	<i>French</i> <i>German</i>	English	<i>Dutch</i>	Exogamous	OPOL – Mixed	English	(M) English, Dutch (F) English
TOWN B FAM 2 (B2)	Hindi English	Telugu Kannada	Telugu English		Exogamous	No real FLP to start then OPOL – Mixed	English	(M) English, Hindi (F) Telugu, English
TOWN B FAM 3 (B3)	Korean English		English	<i>Korean</i>	Exogamous	OPOL – Mixed Mixed	English	(M) Korean, English (F) English
TOWN C FAM 1 (C1)	Finnish English	<i>Swedish</i> <i>German</i>	English	<i>Finnish</i>	Exogamous	OPOL – ML Mixed**	English	(M) Finnish, English (F) English
TOWN C FAM 2 (C2)	Portuguese English	Spanish	English	Portuguese Norwegian <i>Spanish</i>	Exogamous	OPOL – Mixed Time & Place	English	(M) Portuguese, English (F) English

* *Italics indicate that parent has only a basic proficiency in the language, no higher than CEFR A2 (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages).*

** *The mother only started to use English with her youngest child when language delay was detected due to a hearing problem.*

Due to the plurilingual portfolio brought to the family by each of the parents, no one family's linguistic situation is exactly like the next and therefore the families can only loosely be categorised as adopting one or the other type of FLP. Families will often try a number of different strategies, which may change over time, in their attempts to raise their children plurilingually.

Challenges and impacts of isolation

We found that the desirable strategies for achieving family bilingualism as represented in the parental advice literature cited above may collide with the messy realities of life, work, study, family disharmony and the absence of networks with language speakers.

1. Parents coming from a multilingual society.

While most of the families in the project were consciously following variations of an OPOL FLP (see Table 1) some parents who grew up in a multilingual society reported that they did not originally realise that conscious effort might be required in order to pass their language(s) on to their children. They assumed that multiple language acquisition would “just happen”, as it had for themselves. Clearly this is not a logical thought process, and it seems that once this fact is drawn to parents' attention, they realise its truth. However, it points to the fact that language practices are transparent and taken-for-granted by most people, and it is not until there is a problem or some intervention that issues such as this come into focus. This tendency was evident in several of our families who came from societies where the use of two or more languages was commonplace and unremarkable.

This is demonstrated by the mother in Family A1 who was born in Quebec province into a Peruvian family, and grew up trilingual in Spanish, French and English. For her, it was normal to speak three languages and she thought it would be the same for her son. It was only when she came to Australia with her English-speaking husband that she realised that unless she spoke Spanish to her son, he would not learn it.

...in Quebec everyone's bilingual – everyone knows English and French ... and then most of my friends knew three languages so it was really common ... when I had [our son], like it was for sure that he was going to know the three languages, because my whole family was there so he got exposed to a lot of Spanish ... but when we arrived here [Australia], I'm like 'Oh [no] ... if I don't speak to him fully in Spanish... he doesn't hear anyone else speak in Spanish ... so I thought I have to do it now or otherwise it will be too late. (Mother A1).

Family B2 is from India, and the mother speaks Hindi and the father Telugu. The mother explains how it is utterly normal for people to speak 4 or 5 languages in India:

everyone knows about 4 or 5 languages. I know 4, my husband knows, yeah about 4 ... very common in India, yeah. And here [Australia] we just stick to one language, and then, ah no, we won't do that. (Mother B2).

Because each state or each village has a different language ... we don't have to go and learn because there are people around, we don't particularly learn ... (Mother B2).

In this family, too, multilingualism is taken as a fact of life, but because the mother and father have different first (dominant) languages, they communicate in English between themselves. Yet in their own upbringing, wherein: “we don’t have to go and learn”, they acquired multiple languages naturally, rather than learning them formally. This family had not really thought about a family language policy: “We’ll try our best for them to know one/two? language, that’s it, nothing else we haven’t talked about it, yeah”. (Mother B2).

They had assumed that their children would simply grow up speaking the family languages, without realising that of course the context was very different and that the children were not exposed to multiple languages in their Australian home and community. As their first child started to speak in English they realised that without deliberate intervention, plurilingualism was not going to happen.

Family A4 is a refugee family. Their hopes for their children to learn Amharic are complicated by the need to learn English now they are in Australia. The parents do not really have a FLP: they speak in Amharic to each other when the children are present and English when they are alone, but use a mixture of English and Amharic to their children. They speak more English to the oldest child, who was born in Ethiopia, but more Amharic to the youngest child as they came to realise this would be necessary if the language was not to be lost.

2. Extended family and visits to the home country: The ideal versus reality

The extended family is, at least in theory, a good source of language input and for some families in the study this was indeed the case. Migrants’ extended family may be in the home country or another part of Australia, so contact might be infrequent, or conducted only by distance. Again, such contact with extended family members is a recommended technique in books dispensing advice to plurilingual families, but does not always account for the complex nature and sometimes fractured dynamics of people’s actual families. Table 2 presents extended family contact and visits to the home country for the families in the study since their children were born.

Table 2: Home language contact

	HL extended family contact in Australia.	Visits to HL-speaking country
A1*	Grandmother from Canada – 3 months December 2013	Family came to Australia 2012. Mother & children – Canada 4 wks 2016. (Father 1 wk)
A2	Limited contact – no German	Father came to Australia 1991. No visits since children were born.
A3*	Grandmother from Israel– 3 months every year	Family came to Australia 2010. Family – Israel each year – 4 weeks 2011–2014. 2015, 2016 no visits due to buying a home. Next trip April 2017.
A4*	None	Mother came to Australia 2012 to join father who came 2009. No visits.
B1	None since 2013. Little Dutch spoken	Mother came to Australia 1999. Since passed away. Family went to the Netherlands 5 weeks 2011; 4 weeks 2015.
B2	Paternal Grandmother from India – 11 months 2012–2013, 2014–2015; 12 months 2015–2016. Paternal Grandfather from India – 2 months 2013, 2015, 2016)	Family came to Australia 2007. Mother & children – India 6 weeks 2015: 2 weeks with mother's family; father joined 4 weeks with father's family. Youngest child in India 6 months 2015 with paternal grandparents.
B3*	Aunt from Korea – 2 weeks 2015 Grandmother from Korea – 2 months 2015	Family came to Australia 2011. Mother & eldest child – Korea 3 months 2012; both children 3 months 2013; Family 2 weeks 2016.
C1	Aunt and uncle from Finland – 3 months 2015 Grandmother from Finland – usually visits 6 weeks each year	Family came to Australia 2002. Family Finland 6 months 2011; 2 weeks 2012, 2013; 3 weeks 2016.
C2	Grandparents and aunt from Brazil – 5 months 2013–2014 Grandmother from Brazil – 3 months 2014–2015	Mother came to Australia 2006. Mother & eldest child – Brazil 5 months (Father 3 months) 2011–2012. Family – Brazil 2 months 2014; 4 weeks 2016.

* The eldest child was born in the home country –they lived there for periods ranging from 5 months–3 years.

Families A3, B2, B3, C1 and C2 benefitted greatly from access to extended family both in Australia and in the home country. The home-language speaking grandparents visited regularly for extended periods ranging from 2 to 11 months. The grandparents had limited English language proficiency so the children in these families addressed them in the home language. The parents noted that their children's home language development increased dramatically during such visits. The mother in Family A3 noted, when the Grandmother is visiting:

[E]verything changes, the house changes, the language changes, the girls start speaking Hebrew. I have to speak Hebrew to her. So it is actually, it turns into essentially, a Hebrew household at that time. (Mother A3).

However, other families in the project did not have the luxury of extended family support. For example, in Family B1 where the mother is the only home language speaker, (of Dutch) her parents died while the eldest child was very young. She has a brother in the Netherlands, but he married a Spanish woman and they pursue a Spanish family language policy, so that part of the family is not a good source of input in Dutch for her children. Her partner's Australian brother has lived in the Netherlands for 25–30 years with his Dutch partner but they have little contact with him.

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I think it's hard because I'm on my own ... my parents both died so I don't have anyone to speak [to], I have a brother, [in the Netherlands] but he married a Spanish wife so their whole family is, you know, turning toward Spain ... Even when we're there, she insists they speak in Spanish. (Mother B1).

In Family A2 there is a lack of contact between the father and his parents. The father had not spoken German for many years, and it was only after the arrival of the children, and with the encouragement of a colleague, that prompted him to revive it. It is clear though that lack of a family connection may make the task even more challenging.

Father's] parents live in [distant town] [and] they don't have much contact – they laughed when I asked if the kids Skype with his parents. [The father] hadn't spoken German for 20 years (RA reflective journal – Family A2).

In family B2 while there was extensive contact with the father's parents (the youngest child had lived with his paternal grandmother for his first two years, even returning to India with her for six months), the mother, however, rarely had the chance to speak her language with anyone else, and her parents did not visit Australia. This meant the children's exposure to their 3 languages was quite uneven. The family went to India to be reunited with their youngest child. They spent six weeks with the father's family and two weeks with the mother's family where the children received some exposure to Hindi, however, not as much exposure as the mother would have liked:

with the language, I did tell everyone to speak to [her daughter] in Hindi and the elders, like my parents and my aunts, they did speak in Hindi maybe half and half, half English and half Hindi, but her cousins they were all talking in English. (Mother B2).

Sometimes visits from extended family prove disappointing from a language point of view as was the situation in Family C1 when the mother's sister visited for three months. In her reflection the mother expressed her disappointment at the lost opportunity:

I had high hopes for this six months because my sister from Finland and her fiancé were staying with us ... so I thought maybe that will improve [Child's] Finnish, hearing the others talk Finnish to him as well. However, what I didn't anticipate was that my sister and her boyfriend found it challenging talking to [Child] in Finnish because he responded better when you gave him directions in English. So even though I was trying to encourage them to keep talking to [Child] in Finnish they ended up mainly talking English to him, which was quite disappointing for me and obviously didn't really help [Child's] language. (Mother C1)

Difficulties can also arise with the English-speaking Grandparents. The mother in Family C2 feels Portuguese is “not really supported”. The Grandmother was uncomfortable when, after returning from a trip to Brazil, the children were speaking Portuguese to everyone, including

her. Instead of asking the mother to translate she reportedly told them: “OK, you’re in Australia now, we speak English in Australia, ... we don’t speak Portuguese in Australia”. (Mother C2). These stories demonstrate that extended families are far from unproblematic and cannot necessarily be relied upon to provide language support.

3. Impact of being the only source of home language input

One of the biggest challenges for the families in this study was finding the time to provide enough HL input for the children. This impacted in different ways.

Families C1 and C2 both moved to Town C from capital cities where there were HL speech communities and their children had experienced HL play groups and community language schools. Neither family knew of anyone speaking their HL in Town C. Being the only provider of Portuguese for her children proved too much for the mother in C2 who knew their FLP could not be realised in Town C. After only 4 months there, she started looking for work where she knew there would be a large Brazilian speech community:

‘cause we’re not staying in [Town C]... we need to go somewhere where there is a bigger Brazilian community. (Mother C2).

[In Town C], not being exposed, it’s harder ... in Sydney we had Brazilian group. We used to see each other 3 times, 4 times a week ... they had constant contact. (Mother C2).

After 18 months in Town C the mother in C2 found work and the family moved to a large coastal community near a capital city towards the end of the project where even though the father has to commute for work “it’s worth it” because there are “playgroups and sport groups and everything Portuguese” and they are now “living the dream”.

For two families, A1 and C1, in following a strict OPOL FLP, inclusive family communication was sacrificed for the sake of providing more input in the home language. The non-home language (NHL) parents in these families had only a basic understanding of the HL and were willing to forgo their complete understanding of interactions between their partner and child/ren to allow increased use of the HL. As the NHL parent in C1 explained:

I’ve never, I don’t think I’ve ever once said “say something in English” or “switch the conversation to English”. ... if I don’t know what’s going on I just roll with it. (Father C1).

If I really concentrate I can get the gist of the conversation ... if I then lose track or I’m not sure what they’re talking about I don’t, it’s never seemed to matter ... ‘cause it’s more important for them to roll along with whatever they’re talking about. (Father C1).

I have to pay attention to understand. So I just let it go. (Father A1).

In other families (A2, A3, B1, B2, B3, C2), the HL parent wasn’t willing to make this sacrifice and modified their FLP to an OPOL – Mixed approach. They felt it was rude or felt

uncomfortable using the HL when their partners were present and would switch to English for inclusive family communication.

don't speak the Dutch, because he was home and I thought "Oh that's rude", you know, because he's not that fluent in it. (Mother B1).

Personally I wouldn't want to, you know, be divided like that – momma says this and dad says that ... I would feel I would alienate my husband somehow, from the process. (Mother B1)

at home it's for me it's a constant struggle, 'cause it's just too easy to turn to English, 'cause anyway I speak to [partner] in English. (Father A3)

When asked what they thought was hindering their children's language development the father in Family B2 answered *"Probably it's us ... [speaking] English at home probably it's us"*. (Father B2).

This mixing, however, puts further pressure on the HL parent to find the time to provide language input and this often left them with a sense of guilt or failure. When the HL parent also works full-time and/or is studying the language input pressure becomes even greater.

4. The exigencies of work and study

Another challenge faced by families in the research project is the pressure of work and study, with ten of the eleven HL parents involved in one or the other or sometimes both, in a context where most were without extended family to help with childcare. Such a schedule is not always conducive to a consistent language policy in the home, and many of the parents would admit that despite their best intentions, language takes a back seat to the demands of earning a living and managing the household. In this they are not unique, since all families face similar challenges to a greater or lesser extent, but we argue that these kinds of life pressures exacerbate the challenges of isolation and make it even harder for parents to adhere to their plurilingual intentions.

In Family B2, both parents work in a demanding medical field. When the second baby came along, they sent him at the age of eight months to the father's parents in the home country, where he remained for 6 months, because it was simply too much for the family to manage work and two children. Of course this was beneficial for the baby's development of the father's language, and only time will tell how his language profile differs from that of his sister who has had less exposure to it.

For Families A2 and A3 both HL parents worked full-time and struggled to find the time for HL when they got home. For A3, when the father's work required long periods of overtime, this meant using more of the weekend to provide language activities with the children and less time doing normal family activities. As his wife noted:

challenges are I guess with a busy lifestyle it's hard ... I could be doing a lot more everyday... [Father] definitely a busy lifestyle ...

so the main person they're going get this language, this correct language from is not around is only around sort of, really at the end of the day and the weekends. (Mother A3)

When the father in A2 had his work hours extended he found it very difficult to maintain his commitment to provide any language input and struggled with the idea of giving up. "It's a struggle. I sometimes feel like giving up because I find it's a burden, kind of doing everything twice". (Father A2).

Working full-time and getting children to different childcare services each day also made life difficult, as the mother in B3 found. "It was crazy like, the three different [childcare] places ... and because I was working from home ... full-time ... [the children] going to somewhere five days a week". (Mother B3).

And for Family C1 when the partner travels for work as well, it becomes just that bit harder:

Sometimes it is a little bit tricky when you have a husband who travels a lot, you're working and there's so many things going on in your life, so you just sort of sometimes find that you wish there were more hours in a day. (Mother C1).

Conclusion

This paper has described the premises underlying a 3-year longitudinal study of nine families in isolated circumstances in regional Australia. We point out that there is a dearth of literature about how families pass on home language to their children in the absence of a traditional speech community, and in some cases in almost total linguistic isolation. It is therefore timely to explore the experiences of such families, to record the challenges they face and to document their lived experience so that others might learn from theirs. The findings will, we hope, contribute to a better understanding of the need for support for plurilingual families in isolated settings, and to be able to facilitate discussion as to what shape that support might take.

The research project has yielded a wealth of data, upon which we have only touched in this paper. We have set out to document the major challenges and impacts faced by the families caused by lack of contact with other speakers. A finding we had not anticipated was the expectation, by families who had come from multilingual backgrounds, that their children would automatically acquire the languages of the parents, without any direct intervention (and in a few cases, even when the parents converse in English with each other). It came as a rude shock to these couples that they would have to develop a specific home language policy, and stick to it, if their children were to learn their home language(s).

Another factor which impacted was the many different ways in which families interacted with extended family. Family members who might be expected to support the home language policy may be deceased or estranged, as in the cases discussed above. Even in situations where there was considerable support from extended family and regular visits to the home country families still struggled with home language maintenance. This was often due to the challenge of providing enough HL input, which was a common issue in many of the families, putting

additional pressure on the HL parent. A further challenge was the burden of work and/or study, leaving little time and energy for adhering to family language plans. No doubt these family complications are not unique to this group, but the combination of isolation, the absence of other speakers, lack of institutional support in regional Australia, and lack of family support can mean that these families perhaps have greater challenges than some who live in more densely populated and multicultural areas.

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