


Chapter 14

Fostering Bilingual Skills in Individuals With Down Syndrome: Challenges, Opportunities, and Occupational Therapy Contributions

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ABSTRACT

Bilingualism in individuals with Down syndrome offers unique opportunities and challenges for cognitive and linguistic development. Although DS is characterized by intellectual disability and language delays, emerging research demonstrates that bilingual individuals with DS can achieve language proficiency comparable to their monolingual peers with DS. Studies indicate that bilingualism does not hinder, but may enhance, cognitive flexibility and executive functioning. Targeted interventions, particularly those delivered through occupational therapy (OT), support the development of expressive and receptive language skills. These interventions also incorporate multisensory methods, including visual aids and repetition, which align with the learning profiles of individuals with DS. Despite these benefits, implementation challenges persist, such as limited access to bilingual therapists and inconsistent language exposure. Collaborative efforts between therapists, families, and educators are essential to provide consistent, high-quality input across environments.

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3373-1752-6.ch014

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INTRODUCTION

Bilingualism is now widely recognized as a global norm, with estimates suggesting that more than half of the world's population uses more than one language regularly (Bialystok, 2011). Within this multilingual landscape, increasing attention has been directed toward the linguistic trajectories of neurodivergent individuals, particularly those with Down syndrome (DS), a genetic condition often associated with intellectual disability and language production challenges (Polišenská & Kapalková, 2014). Historically, concerns have been raised about the cognitive and linguistic impacts of dual-language exposure on children with DS. However, emerging research has increasingly challenged these assumptions.

Recent evidence demonstrates that bilingualism does not negatively impact language development in individuals with DS and may, in fact, be feasible without adverse effects when sufficient support is provided (Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2005; Edgin, et al., 2011). For instance, Paradis (2016) found that bilingual children with DS showed comparable abilities in each language relative to monolingual children with DS, with variability largely influenced by input quantity and quality. Moreover, bilingualism in DS may offer cognitive and social advantages, including enriched executive functioning and broader social participation, aligning with benefits observed in typically developing bilinguals (Adesope et al., 2010; Liogier d'Ardhuy et al., 2015). Nonetheless, bilingual development in DS is highly individualized and influenced by a constellation of factors, including family language practices, cultural context, socioeconomic status, and co-occurring developmental concerns (Marinova-Todd et al., 2016).

Occupational therapy (OT), with its holistic and client-centered approach, is increasingly recognized for its potential to support bilingual language development in individuals with Down syndrome (DS). Communication, a cornerstone of social participation and occupational engagement, is frequently addressed by occupational therapists, particularly in pediatric settings. Research demonstrates that children with DS can succeed in bilingual environments when provided with structured and supportive contexts (Ward & Sanoudaki, 2021). Collaboration among occupational therapists, speech-language pathologists, educators, and families is vital to designing inclusive environments that promote bilingualism while being responsive to the developmental and cultural context of each child (Davidson, 2019). This interdisciplinary teamwork is especially important in bilingual households where communication needs span across languages. Studies have emphasized that, contrary to some clinical myths, bilingual exposure does not hinder language acquisition in children with DS and may even offer cognitive and social benefits (Bird et al., 2005, 2009, 2016).

This chapter explores the state of bilingualism in individuals with DS, grounding its analysis in empirical data, theoretical frameworks, and clinical practices. It

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