



LANGUAGE IN MULTILINGUAL FAMILIES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

In April 2020 we launched a survey to find out about the effect of the lockdown on patterns of language use in multilingual families in the UK and in Ireland. The survey closed on 12th July, and we are pleased to share a preliminary report of the findings, a more complete set of analyses will follow and will be published on the project website:

<https://research.reading.ac.uk/celm/research/2343/>

The project is led by researchers at the Centre for Literacy and Multilingualism and Bilingualism Matters@Reading at the University of Reading in collaboration with colleagues from CamBilingNetwork at the University of Cambridge, UCL BiLingo at UCL, the University of Oxford and NALDIC, Mother Tongues Ireland, and We Live Languages.

This survey is phase 1 of a project which will continue until April 2021. Those families that have agreed to continue to phase 2 will be contacted before the end of July to indicate their availability for a video interview, and to complete a shorter survey in the autumn. The interviews with a small but representative sample of families will help us give more context and greater depth to the results of the survey.

In the following four sections we provide information on the profile of the survey respondents and on their attitudes towards multilingualism. We then introduce a snapshot of language use in school-age children before concluding with some preliminary findings on the parents' perceived effects of lockdown on the family's languages other than English.

1. Who completed the survey?

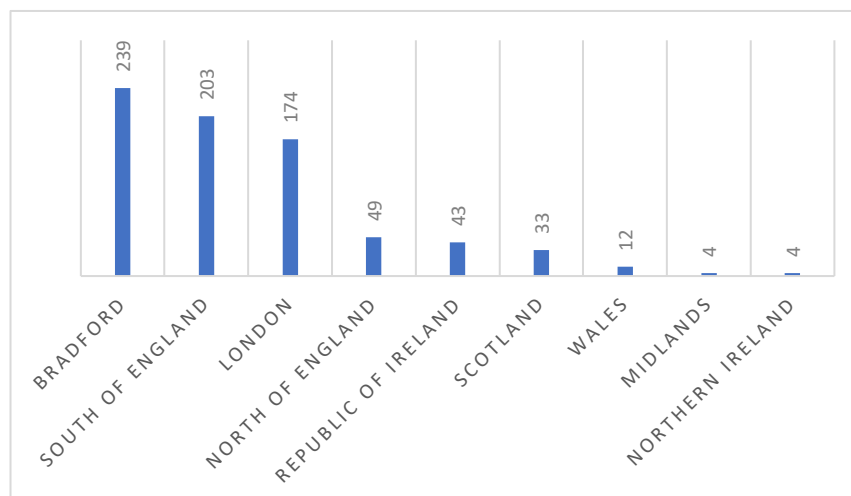
We had 1031 parents and caregivers who accessed our online study between 20th April and 12th July 2020, and a total of 761 complete survey responses.

We were pleased to have representatives from all the four UK nations and from the Republic of Ireland. The largest number of respondents came from Bradford and London, followed by families in the South of England. Parents reported a total of 95 different languages spoken alongside English.

Figure 1. A visualisation of the number of different languages and their frequency

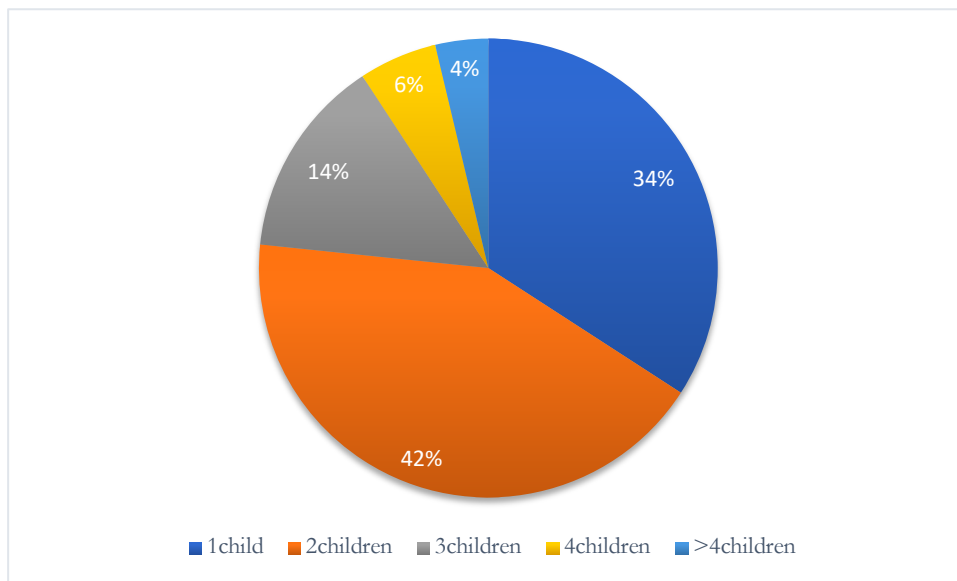


Figure 2. A breakdown of the survey respondents by geographical location



More than 40% of respondents had two children, and a just over a third were families with only one child.

Figure 3. Number of children per family



4% of our respondents were from single-parent families and, and between 13% and 18% had live-in grandparents, aunts and uncles, or a live-in carer. Parents declared special educational needs for 6% of the children.

The majority of children attended English mainstream childcare or school, and the age breakdown was the following: children between 0 and 2 (N = 225), between 2.1 and 4 (N = 240), between 4.1 and 11 (N = 724) and between than 11 and 18 (N = 368). Almost 20% of children also attended a complementary school (N = 146).

A quick guide to reading the figures in the following sections

The survey had several questions on parents and children’s attitudes towards multilingualism and the use of English and other languages. We asked respondents to rate a series of statements on a sliding scale from “not at all important” (0) to “very important” (100). In the current and following sections we use boxplots to visualise the ratings from 0 to 100 for a range of different questions.

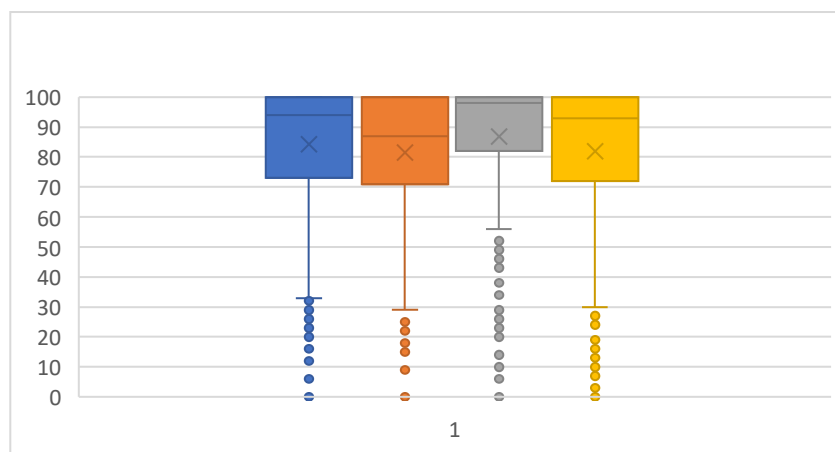
A boxplot is constructed of two parts, a box and a set of whiskers. The lowest point is the minimum value, and the highest point is the maximum value in the sample. The horizontal line drawn in the middle of the box denotes the median, i.e. the middle value of the dataset. The median is a value separating the higher half from the lower half of the data sample. The dots outside of the whiskers are outliers, i.e. observations that lie outside the general pattern of the data.

So, for example, in Figure 4 below, for Q1 the minimum value was 32, the maximum value was 100 and the median value 94, there are also a number of outliers found below the minimum value.

2. What do parents think about multilingualism?

The data in Figure 4 shows that being multilingual is, overall, a very important aspect of the respondents’ identity and of their children’s identity. Similarly, keeping in touch with extended family members who do not speak English is a priority for the majority of parents and children. Follow-up interviews will allow us to understand the range of views represented in the survey.

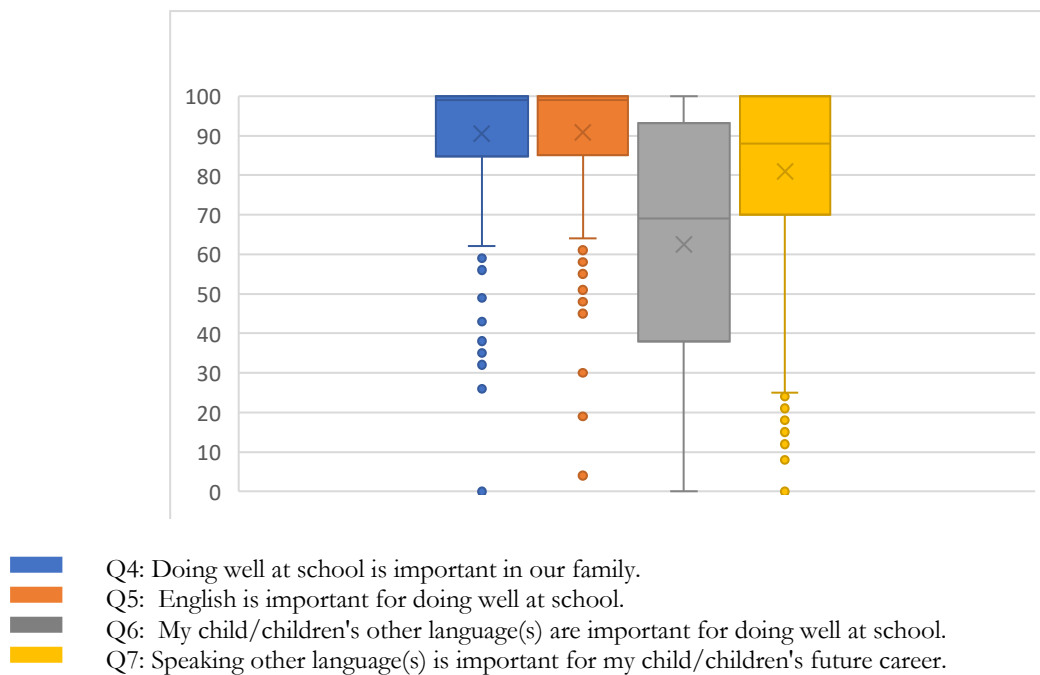
Figure. 4. Multilingual identity and family connections



- Q1: Being multilingual is an important part of my personal identity
- Q2: Being multilingual is an important part of my child/children’s personal identity
- Q3: Keeping in regular contact with members of our family who do not speak English is important to me.
- Q4: Keeping in regular contact with members of our family who do not speak English is important to my child/children

In Figure 5 we summarise the responses of parents of children between the ages and 4 and 18. Academic success was overall very important for the majority of parents and so was the role of English to do well at school. The family's other languages were generally considered less important for school, although there is more variation in the range of responses. Other languages were however considered an asset for future career options. Here too, we find a range of views; further analyses and parental interviews will help us with a better understanding of the general pattern.

Figure. 5. Importance of English and other languages for school and work

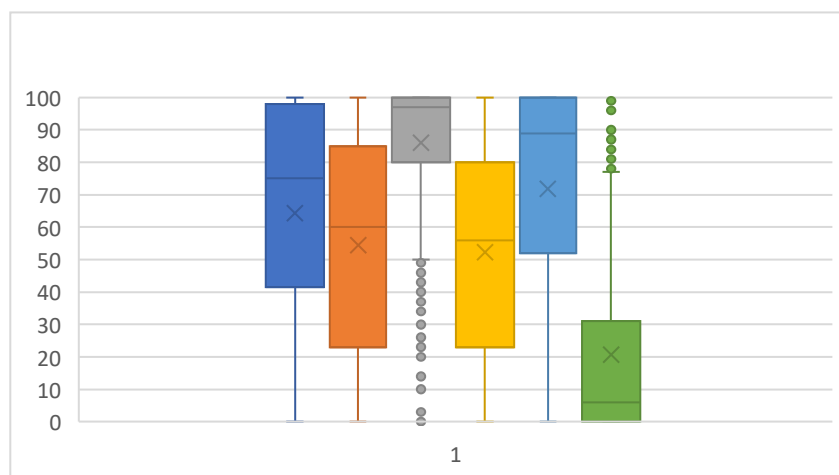


3. How do children use English and their other languages?

When we asked parents of children between 4 and 18 about homework and reading, watching TV and streamed programmes, and playing computer games, there was again a considerable amount of variation, some of which is due to the wide age range (4 to 18) in this very preliminary analysis.

As shown in Figure 6 below, overall children tended to use their other language(s) less than English for these recreational activities, and in general parents were more frequently engaged with their children's English homework than in reading in their other languages. There is quite a degree of variation across the different activities, and a number of outliers in both directions for the frequency of TV/streamed programmes (some children watched very few, if any programmes in English) and computer gaming, with a few children using their other language very frequently for this leisure activity.

Figure 6. Use of English and other languages in primary and secondary school-age children

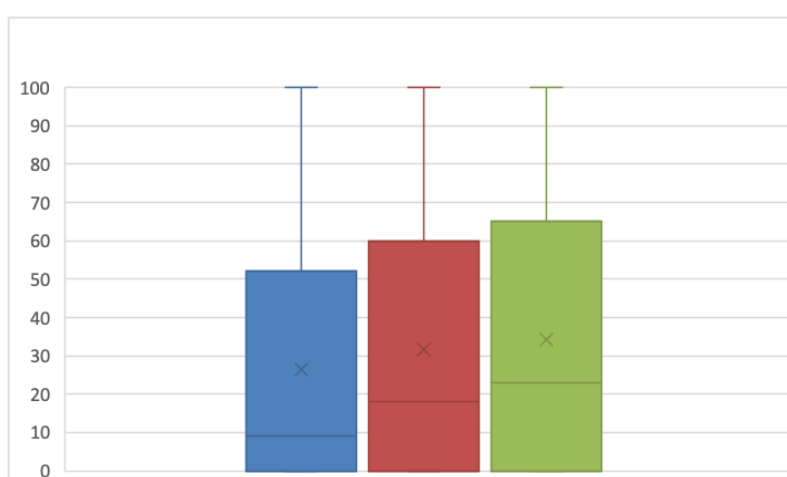


- Q8: My child/children get help at home with their English homework
- Q9: My child/children get help at home with reading in their other language(s)
- Q10: My child/children watch TV/streamed internet programmes in English
- Q11: My child/children watch TV/streamed internet programmes in their other language(s)
- Q12: My child/children play computer games in English
- Q13: My child/children play computer games in their other language(s)

4. What happened during lockdown?

We asked parents whether they thought that lockdown and social distancing measure would negatively affect their children’s spoken English across different ages. Overall parents did not seem particularly concerned, but parents of younger children seemed somewhat more apprehensive than parents of older children.

Figure 7. Parents’ concerns about the effects of lockdown on spoken English

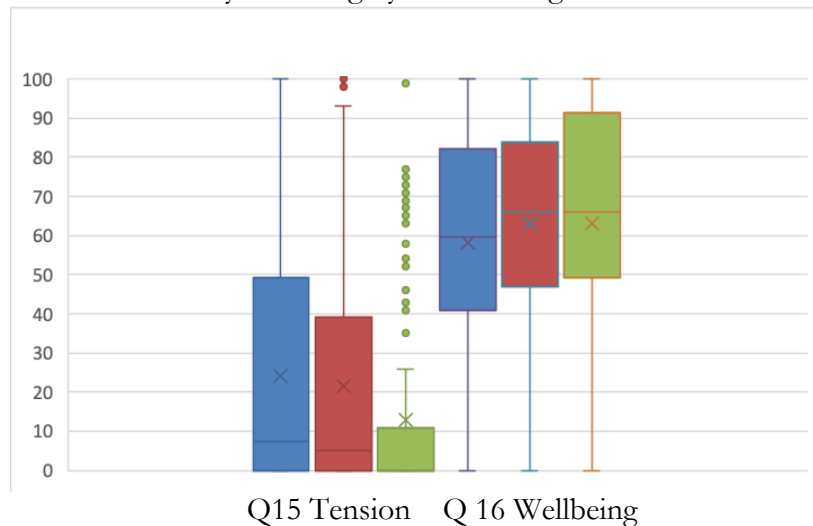


Q 14: My child/children's spoken English will be negatively affected by school closures and social distancing measures.

- Secondary school children (12-18)
- Primary school children (4-11)
- Infants and Toddlers (0-3)

We then asked whether use of the other language(s) was a source of tension or of family wellbeing. Overall there was a pattern suggesting a positive association between family wellbeing and use of other languages across all age groups and more so in younger than older children.

Figure 8. Use of other language(s) perceived as a source of tension or family wellbeing by children's age



Q15: Use of the other language(s) is a source of tension in my household.

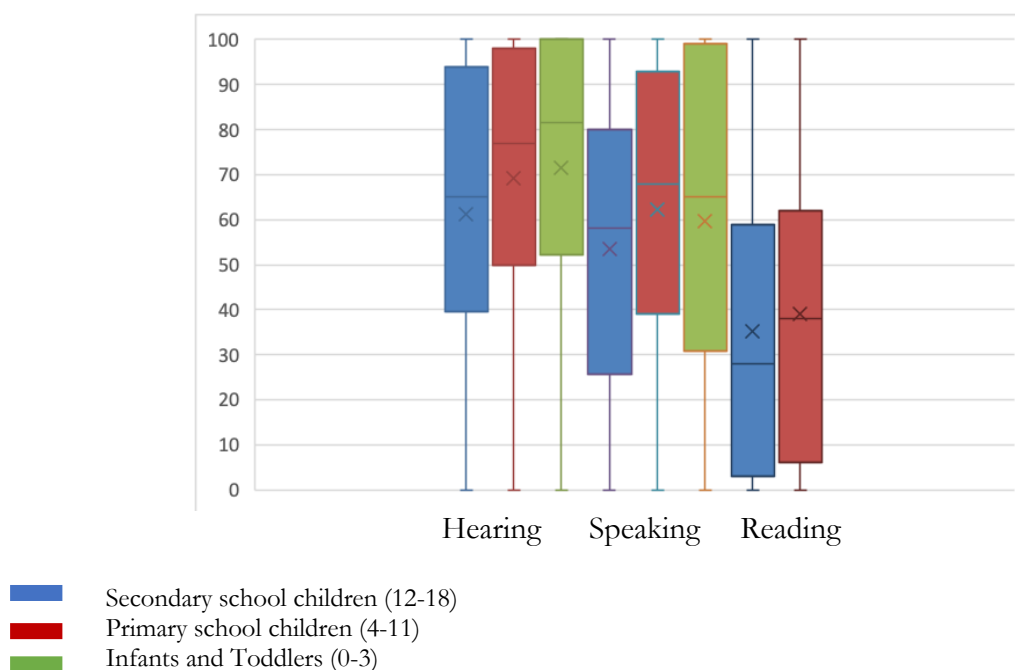
Q16: More opportunities to use the other language(s) are a source of family wellbeing.

- Secondary school children (12-18)
- Primary school children (4-11)
- Infants and Toddlers (0-3)

Finally, questions 17, 18, and 19 asked about children's increased opportunity to hear more of their other language(s), speak more their other language(s), and read more in their other languages (only for primary and secondary school children).

Figure 9 shows that parents' impression was that children across all ages had more opportunities to hear the other languages than before lockdown, with a more pronounced trend for pre-school and primary school age children. Younger children – particularly primary school children – were also more likely to speak the other languages more during lockdown than previously. A more modest increase was perceived in reading in the other language(s).

Figure 9. Parents' impressions on children hearing, speaking and writing more in the other languages during lockdown



Overall these preliminary data suggest that parents perceived a shift towards more opportunities to hear and use the other language(s) during lockdown, particularly in the case of younger children, but once again there was a considerable amount of variation. More in-depth interviews and more detailed analyses of the survey will allow us to find out more about the range of different views.

What next?

We are now planning to contact those parents who have left us their details to arrange an online interview before the start of the next school year. A face-to-face chat – albeit a virtual one – with parents - and children too if they want to take part - will give us a more rounded picture of the survey results.

Parents who have expressed an interest will then be asked to fill in a shorter survey in the autumn to track any longer-term changes once children have returned to school and after the progressive easing of lockdown during the summer.

We will be posting further updates on our website so watch this space!

Thanks again for taking part in this project and helping us understand more about language use and attitudes towards multilingualism in families across the UK and Ireland.

Ludovica Serratrice (University of Reading, Centre for Literacy and Multilingualism)
Naomi Flynn (University of Reading, Bilingualism Matters@Reading)
Holly Joseph (University of Reading, Bilingualism Matters@Reading)
Anna Wolleb (University of Reading, Bilingualism Matters@Reading)
Elspeth Wilson (University Cambridge, CamBilingNetwork)

Napoleon Katsos (University Cambridge, CamBilingNetwork)
Froso Argyri (UCL, UCLBiLingo)
Victoria Murphy (University of Oxford, NALDIC)
Hamish Chalmers (University of Oxford, NALDIC)
Francesca La Morgia (Mother Tongues Ireland)
Madalena Xanthopoulou (We Live Languages)