

Early Bilingualism from Birth to 8

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OVERVIEW

- Early bilingualism
- Bilingual education in Singapore
- Language and culture: Respecting and using children's background
- Language learning in the Singapore classroom (Kindergarten – Primary 3)
- Assessment for Learning: Feedback

EARLY BILINGUALISM

Linguistic Complexity in Asia

With a few exceptions, Asian countries are bilingual, trilingual and even multilingual.

- Singapore: 4 major ethnic groups, 20 specific dialect groups.
- India: 1652 mother tongues, 700 languages belonging to 4 language families with 10 major writing systems.
- Philippines: bilingual policy but at least trilingual, 100 vernaculars, 9 used as a medium of instruction for transitional bilingualism.

Adults have difficulty learning a second language

Most children take about 5-7 years, without formal teaching, to accomplish the remarkable feat of learning a language, sometimes more.

Bilinguals can learn

- both languages simultaneously in the home
 - through submersion in a foreign culture
 - immersion or foreign-language classrooms with the majority-language environment, etc.
- (Makin, Campbell, Jones, 2002)

No definitive answers to questions in bilingual education

- The conditions for successful bilingual education are complex and academics are still exploring
- There are controversies in most areas of bilingual education and there are no clear cut answers.
- This talk is based on available information and findings.

At the very beginning...

- Babies do hear and learn language patterns while in the womb. They can easily identify their mother's voice at birth, and show a marked preference for language that mimicks the patterns spoken by the mother.
- Babies can tell when a new language is being spoken not only by listening but by merely watching the speaker's mouth. Exposing them to a second language by the age of ten months can make a significant difference in their ability to recognize and mimic distinctive sounds later.

Early language development

- For most of the first year, babies are not yet mobile but they can listen and absorb all the sounds (and visual stimuli) around them. This early stage seems extremely important for listening and categorizing sounds as “native” (dominant) and “non-native” (other).
- They can mimick simple sounds (e.g. mama, baba).
- Typical development in the early years: from crying, cooing, babbling to one-word sentences, two word sentences, simple sentences, compound sentences, complex sentences.

Language and social development:

- Newborn infants can focus upon and respond to the talk around them. By three months they are beginning to initiate and maintain social interaction and attention.
- By the end of their second year, children are already able to recognise and use role-play in spontaneous play situations
- The vocabulary and language structures acquired in learning to talk lay the foundation for reading and later, writing and social development.

FAQ 1: Should there be a dominant language, a ‘mother tongue’ at this early stage?

- Available research evidence indicates that it is beneficial to have a clear strong primary language for children growing up in a bilingual environment.
- What seems important is having the chance to distinguish between the main language and all others. So a third or fourth language does not seem important at this stage as it means the main language is heard less often.

FAQ 2: Does technology help at this stage?

- Prior to about age three, language learning requires face-to-face interaction with the speaker.
- Many studies show that during screen time (via television, DVDs, etc.) , children are not absorbing the subtleties of language nor are they receiving cues by mimicking a sound and having the speaker respond positively or present the same sound more clearly.

BILINGUAL EDUCATION IN SINGAPORE

For Children who don’t speak English at home, bilingualism means maintaining and developing the ‘first’ or home language.

For Children who do speak English at home, it might mean learning a second (subsequent) language.

Learning a new language means learning an additional set of complex processes involving

- phonology (sounds of the language),
- semantics (meaning of the language),
- and syntax (grammatical patterns of the language)

Explanation from Bilingual Studies

- The two languages influence and interconnect with each other in the processing and learning system. The concepts and understandings in one language can be transferred into the other language.
- Often one language becomes more developed and the thinking and reasoning (e.g. cognitive

academic language) proficiencies and dispositions are strengthened.

- Thus, one language becomes dominant. If the language environment or domain changes, and the less dominant language is used frequently, then the balance may change.

Factors that Support Bilingual Development

- A need for 2 languages: Young children need to use both languages in social interaction and negotiation.
- A consistent pattern of language use: Children acquire language in meaningful interactions with others, and as they communicate, they also acquire knowledge of how the language works.
- A community of support for both languages: Teachers, friends and family/community members provide models and support for language learners.
- Adequate opportunities for full development of both languages.

(Makin, Campbell & Jones 1995; Makin & Jones, 2002).

Recommendations for Supporting Language Acquisition

- Children motivated to talk and listen in familiar environments -- important to have abundant input from a trusted one within a shared experience.
- Adults and peers often recast or expand on children's utterances to enhance meaning -- provide support and scaffolding of complex task.
- Learning is best done in relaxed and enjoyable experiences without anxiety.

Effective teaching strategies that teachers need to learn are to:

- provide flexibility to cater to a more culturally diverse population and to cope with children from different progress levels.
- introduce small group and paired work in addition to the usual whole class teaching to facilitate differentiated instruction.
- generate meaningful interactions between themselves and the children and amongst the children themselves.
- encourage the children to talk about their experiences, e.g., making personal responses to a book or sharing their own life experiences.
- recognise/affirm the children by displaying their writings and drawings for others to see and read.

Communicative Approaches Used in Children's Early Years

- use of non-linguistic understandings as a basis for figuring out language
- use of whatever is of interest or in focus
- use of language as either a referential or expressive tool as well as use of whatever is familiar or works best!
- tuning in selectively to how others express/convey meanings and comprehend
- asking questions (verbal/non-verbal) to work out or elicit information
- imitating what others say, either at the time or later in an appropriate (or inappropriate) context
- developing and using general rules or principles for noting or performing meaningful patterns
- communicating, using every means available to work towards participation and maintaining a conversation

(Lindfors, 1992)

LANGUAGES & CULTURE

Biculturalism is an important factor in the children's motivation to learn to write and read in two languages

- Learning a language always implies some learning of a culture.
- 'Additive' or 'Subtractive' bilingualism?
- Links between language, culture, self-identity, thinking prowess and educational success
- Maintaining mother tongue: promote cultural diversity, ethnic identity, social adaptability, psychological security, linguistic awareness (Crystal, 1987)

Respecting a child's culture

When you come to think of it, what we eat and drink, how we dress, what we believe, and myriads of other behaviours depend largely on our culture. While we know this consciously, we also habitually accept our own way as natural; as the way. This habitual acceptance is part of what can cause miscommunication in a multicultural society. The many instances of miscommunication between members of different cultural groups are due to the parties interpreting each others' words and actions in terms of their own understandings, assuming that these are shared when in fact they are not. (Ng, 1995).

What is the impact on children when they are asked not to speak in their mother tongue in class?

"Our experiences to date are the pegs on which we hang new information. If I can't attach new information to old conceptual knowledge, I can't learn it. It's as simple as that. When all my pegs are unrecognised, unvalued, unmentioned, by implication my past experiences are worthless and so am I. How then can I learn at school? And why would I? An inclusive curriculum means including the kids we teach, in the books we choose, the stories we tell, the classroom environment and the content we select. Even more important is the way we teach - the interaction between every teacher and every student." (Lingo Video Australia)

How culture is reflected in schools

- What we choose to put in the curriculum
- The teaching strategies we use
- The goals we set for children (our expectations)
- The ways we evaluate their learning and performance
- How we report to their parents
- The relationships between teachers and children
- The relationships between / amongst the children
- How we reward / punish, what we reward / punish for

Diversity: A Summary

- We differ in what we drink, how we dress, how we behave and what we believe.
 - Differences: social class, cultural backgrounds, religion, language
 - Differences have profound implications
 - for literacy development
 - minority groups can be marginalised, disadvantaged, discriminated against and persecuted.
- (Cazden, 1988; 2001; Myers, 2009)

Cultural mismatch: Example

There was a difference in the way diverse groups responded to some stories children related during sharing time. To the same African-American child's story...

- Caucasian adults responded rather negatively: "...terrible story, incoherent," and "this kid hops from one thing to the next". The child's academic standing was rated as low.
- The African-American adults' found the story "well formed, easy to understand, and interesting with lots of detail and description," and the child was rated as very bright!

(Cazden, 1988, p. 18)

What to beware of:

- a "cultural mismatch between the narrative themes and styles of the children and the knowledge and expectations of their (in this case, Caucasian) teachers."
- restricting versus fostering the children's language growth by the kind of responses you make to the way they tell stories
- responding negatively to children thus preventing them from using their own effective ways of learning and from using language from their home backgrounds as well as reducing their opportunities for developing language in school

General Guidelines for Dealing with Cultural Difference in Multicultural Classrooms

Teachers should:

- acknowledge, value, and celebrate cultural differences.
- develop a culturally responsive classroom.
- develop strategies for dealing with differences in learning styles.
- foster affirming communication strategies in the classroom.

Promoting cultural/linguistic diversity in the classroom

- Is the use of mother tongue allowed?
- Are there books in the child's language?
- Does the classroom environment accept and reflect the child's cultural background, e.g.
 - acknowledging the child's heroes in his/her myths and legends?
 - creating opportunities for the child to share his/her cultural practices (art, music, dance, drama) with the class?

Show understanding of children's cultural backgrounds

- Say the child's name correctly.
- Read books reflecting the child's cultural heritage
- Have a professional curiosity about the child's dominant language (understand how it functions, its sound system and its relevant syntactic features – no need to learn it).
- Respect the child's religious beliefs and dietary habits as well as important festivals, ceremonies, music, dance, etc.

Understanding Students' Understandings

"Effective teaching and learning is achieving a meeting of minds, expressed by teachers as 'How do I reach the children?' or by children as 'What's s/he trying to get at?'" (Bruner, 1996. Pg 45)

“If the culture of the teacher is to become part of the consciousness of the child, then the culture of the child must first be in the consciousness of the teacher. (Bernstein, source unknown)

Review of Basic Findings: Literacy and Bi-literacy

- Best preparation for literacy learning is learning to talk and having many opportunities to talk.
- Least complicated entry into literacy learning: Begin to read and write the language that children already speak. Oral language can help them to read & write.
- Children aged 5-8 can learn second language quite easily in good school programmes with well trained teachers who provide good speech models.
- Programmes need to have many opportunities for children to speak and hear stories told and read in a relaxed and informal learning environment

“Brought together, play and work are pleasurable; it is only their separation that is painful.”

(Elkind, 2007)

“...provide young children with the experiences that will allow them to emerge from Kindergarten and first grade with a robust sense of industry and competence, and an eagerness and enthusiasm for further schooling.”

(Elkind, 2006)

- In a home full of books, a child naturally acquires the concept of a book and to value books in the home – message that reading is important and reading is fun.
- It is from such experiences that the Shared Book Approach was developed.

Quality of book-reading interaction between an adult and child is highly related to the child’s vocabulary skills at 4 - 7 years of age. There is also an effect on the child’s enjoyment, motivation and reading.

- An adult’s supportive and emotionally positive presence during book reading is more important than either home background or parents’ education.

LANGUAGE LEARNING IN THE SINGAPORE CLASSROOM (KINDERGARTEN – PRIMARY 3)

Some Project Elements

- Integration with other curriculum areas.
- Multisensory (auditory, visual, kinaesthetic) approach through the language skills.
- Meaning-based approach emphasizing understanding.
- Activities to be related to children’s level and interest (e.g. high interest stories).
- Learning best in informal environment.
- Teaching in whole class, small group, individual - continuous collection of information about children’s language progress.
- Elements from emergent literacy findings, e.g. phonological awareness.

Writing in the home

- Children writing to each other (or to their relatives e.g. grandparents in another country) are both valuable and authentic reading and writing activities. Children also get great pleasure from writing their own simple little books with lots of pictures.

Format of Writing Lessons in Singapore Primary Classrooms

- Teacher writes with children
- Children write in collaborative small groups
- Children write individually.

Learning Centres

- Small groups (of similar progress level) in learning centres for listening, speaking, reading and writing, word study skills and other language tasks.

Reciprocity of learning to read and write

Importance of reading is well established, but the importance of writing is not so well known.

Extra power from writing in learning to read

- Implies that teachers should create opportunities for children to write
- Reading and writing instruction should happen side by side
- Acknowledges that writers have to know how to do certain things with language that overlap with things that readers have to know or do.
- More valuable than spelling lists or sounding out words – children should be working on authentic reading/writing tasks, especially open-ended tasks, to discover new things they have not attended to before.
- A big challenge in the writing of a simple sentence is how to direct ones' attention to detail while holding the whole message in the mind. Writing one word at a time is an easy task but it is more challenging to construct and write a sentence, circling back and forth between the constraints of the phonemic, grammatical and meaning levels.
- Particularly difficult for second language speakers who do not have rich and complex knowledge of English – they need more oral language opportunities.

Talking, Reading and Writing

- Learning in one language area enriches the potential for learning in the other areas.
- Most learners can get a circular exchange between the language activities working well.
- Instruction should be more powerful if it is planned so that oral language, reading and writing are linked together so that they move forward together.

Questioning

Suggested questions using **Bloom's** Taxonomy with *Space Junk* and *When I Grow Up*:

Remembering: How fast do spacecraft orbit the earth?

Understanding: Why are even small pieces of space junk dangerous to spacecraft? What word tells you that Cory's mother was very upset?

Applying: What did you learn about littering that might change your behaviour on the beach?

Analysing: Why did the author use *When I Grow Up* as her story title?

Evaluating: What kind of person is Steve Jackson? Why do you say so?

Creating: If you were threatened by bullies, what would you do?

“The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing. One cannot help but be in awe when he contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality. It is enough if one tries merely to comprehend a little of this mystery every day. Never lose a holy curiosity” (Albert Einstein, 1879 – 1955)

ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING: FEEDBACK

Getting an extra edge from formative feedback

*Supporting teachers in developing the use of assessment for learning has been shown to roughly double the speed of learning... **students learned in six months what would have taken a year to learn in other classrooms.***

Main Concern:

There is no time...The exams...

- We need to teach to tests
- Teaching to the test or examinations is NOT the problem (it is unwise not to prepare students for examinations)

Managing change

- Examinations and tests have been an asset to the educational system, but they could also be viewed as its bane.
- The problem is when teaching to the examinations is the only teaching method.
- Examinations and tests are necessary, but can only measure small samples of students' knowledge. If we teach only to those samples we limit what students can learn. Over-emphasis on examinations leads to "teaching to the test", narrowing the curriculum and reducing educational achievement.
- This would obviously lead to lowering of educational quality and standards
(Graves, 2000; Sahlberg 2012).

Results of a happy balance

If a happy balance is achieved, we will obtain the necessary assessment without limiting learning. Students will remain confident, engaged and motivated and will make greater gains from schooling. Teachers will be enthused, and parents will learn how they can better support students' learning.

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