

By LINETTE LAI

LEARNING a second language at an early age could help your brain function better as an adult, a study has found.

Participants in the research, which involved 81 undergraduates from Singapore and China, took part in several tasks designed to test executive control – which refers to how the brain is able to tune out distractions or irrelevant information.

Those who learnt a second language earlier and used it frequently performed better at these tasks. The average age at which the Singaporeans started learning a second language was slightly over three years old.

However some participants began learning a second language before they were a year old.

“Singapore is increasingly becoming an English-dominated society, with more families speaking English at home,” said Assistant Professor Yow Wei Quin of the Singapore University of Technology and Design, who co-authored the study.

“There is a real concern that we are starting to lose that motivation to learn and speak two languages. The later you expose your

Early start on 2nd language ‘aids brain function’

Such language users tune out distractions better: Study

child to a second language, the less likely it is that your child will enjoy learning it and be proficient in its use.”

Previous studies have ascertained that bilingual children tend to be better than their monolingual counterparts at tasks that require selective attention and the mental flexibility to code-switch between two concepts.

However, Prof Yow’s latest research is the first to explore how the age of second language acqui-

sition affects executive control in adults.

But the study does not mean that children should always be encouraged to do so from as young an age as possible.

Bilingualism specialist Hu Guangwei, who is an associate professor at the National Institute of Education, noted that these positive effects are generally seen in individuals who are fluent in two languages.

“Age of acquisition is not a sufficient condition for these benefits to occur,” he said.

“It is unlikely for the advantages to be reaped by individuals who have only a smattering of proficiency in a second language, and who seldom use that language.”

Frequency of use indeed seems to be the key, at least in the experience of Madam Chan Siu Ching, whose 12-year-old daughter April started speaking Cantonese at home and “very naturally” picked up English and Chinese in kindergarten.

“My daughter is very curious and inquisitive about everything,” the 45-year-old housewife said. “Building strong foundations in language has had an impact.”

✉ linettel@sph.com.sg

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START THEM YOUNG

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