

Tackling Bilingualism: A Necessary Journey

Bilingualism was borne out of Singapore's need to operate globally and 'retain' cultural identity. However, it is time we put in more effort into its second objective. BY RAJA JUMIRA

Bilingualism has become a hallmark of a Singaporean, and a cornerstone of our education system. The aim of the bilingual education policy is to ensure that while Singapore remains viable economically all over the world, Singaporeans need not lose their cultural values or identity.

Singapore's education system promotes and stipulates bilingualism as its core policy so that children pick up at least two languages in schools – English and their mother tongue.

As such, the value of knowing more than one language is indisputable, and most people believe in the value of teaching languages when a child is young. But how do children learn languages so quickly?

Understanding Bilingualism

Fiona Walker, Chief Executive Officer and Principal of Schools, Julia Gabriel Centre explains, "The optimum period for a child to learn a language, besides their mother tongue, is from zero to six years old. From birth, a child's senses absorb the sounds

around them; their brain stores the complex patterns that make up language and their windows of language are wide open, resulting in them being able to absorb what they learn more easily."

According to Lim Wee Ming, Founder of My Little Genius, a bilingual whole-brain stimulation programme for children aged between six months and five years, "language, in terms of grammar and vocabulary, stimulates the logical left brain, while language, in terms of intonation and accentuation,

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stimulates the creative right brain. Hence, language is an extremely important yet easily applicable tool to develop a child's whole brain."

Although it is not quite as simple as saying "We should encourage bilingualism in our children", Rachel Westbrook, Education Consultant of My English School, believes that the focus should be on the quality and comprehension aspect of that equation. Rachel says, "Bilingualism is important, but the learning, reasoning and critical thinking that go into effective bilingualism is absolutely critical."

Join the Bilingual Bandwagon

Former Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew, a long-time advocate of bilingualism, has urged parents in Singapore to introduce bilingualism to their children at an early age. And the panel of experts whom SC speaks to couldn't agree more!

Research has shown that bilinguals tend to be more creative thinkers than those who speak one language. In addition, one study suggests that their brain functions may stay sharper as they age.

Tan Meng Wei, CEO of Star Learners Group, points out, "Bilingualism enables children to converse with a wider range of people. They are able to use the common language to have direct communication by sharing ideas, thoughts and feelings. Learning another language also exposes children to another culture. This equips them to be more accommodating, respectful and flexible in this changing world."

This analysis is seconded by Wee Ming. "When children grow up to be very proficient in English and their mother tongue languages, they will understand their mother tongue culture better, are able to communicate better with people from other countries but who share the same mother tongue language (for example, speaking Mandarin with the Chinese from China, or speaking Bahasa with the Indonesians or Malaysians etc.), and will have a better advantage in contributing positively to the nation's economic development and growth."

Raise Your Very Own Polyglot

Jeyarajadas Pandian, Supervisor of Umar Pulavar Tamil Language Centre and Principal Master Teacher, Tamil Language, Curriculum Planning and Development Division from the Ministry of Education shares tips on how to get your little linguist to begin learning.

Create a conducive home environment for children to mingle and interact in the Mother Tongue language (MTL). Children first learn to speak the language at home by listening to and taking part in the daily conversations with family members.

Whether you are talking to your child about a new word, helping them write a letter, or reading a story out loud, your interaction will maximise your child's language understanding.

Take into consideration that the learning of MTL must not be forced onto your children. Rather, the learning should take place in a very informal but meaningful setting. For example, use more MTL verb forms in the language rather than translating English nouns into MTL words (chair, table, mouse, elephant, etc.). Examples of verb forms include "open the door", "wash your hands", and "bring the toy".

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As Easy As yī, èr, sān

The government has encouraged bilingualism, predominantly the study of Standard Mandarin, among Singaporeans for many years, particularly since the launch of the Speak Mandarin Campaign in 1979. Traditionally, learning Mandarin is a difficult and stressful process, often taught by rote, and invariably not an enjoyable experience for many students! In recent years, however, it has been more widely recognised that the way in which children learn the language is vital to their successful ability to use it.

Learning another language also exposes children to another culture. This equips them to be more accommodating, respectful and flexible in this changing world.

Fiona shares, “There has been greater emphasis on the spoken language and children are encouraged to converse more, therefore bringing greater meaning and purpose to the language. There has been a move away from the strict, rote learning methodology of the past to more creative ways of teaching Mandarin. This has resulted in more non-Chinese opting to take Mandarin as a subject in school.”

Meng Wei adds, “The Ministry of Education has now taken a more customised approach to the teaching of language, by accommodating children with different learning abilities. For example, students who are competent in both English Language and Mother Tongue are

Listening and Speaking

Listening should take place through ample and varied opportunities, for example by listening to age-appropriate MTL stories, songs and children’s programme.

Interact with your child and encourage them to verbalise their ideas and thoughts in the MTL. This will boost your child’s confidence in using the language.

Repeat and extend the language the child uses by talking about related topics and thereby introducing new vocabulary.

For those living in English-speaking homes, both parents and child are strongly encouraged to invite relatives and MTL-speaking friends regularly to your homes to expose your child to interactions in the MTL.

Reading

Reading is related to a child’s emotional feelings. The selection of books must be left to the child’s choice. When you’re selecting books for your child, they may perceive the process as more of ‘teaching and learning’. Instead, reading must be enjoyable and interesting for them.

You should read aloud with your child, using the MTL by reading MTL storybooks as often as you can. Explore the content further by letting your child ask questions and discuss with you about the characters, plot events and themes.

Draw attention to a new word. Say it slowly as part of the sentence and then use the pictures to help build a deeper understanding of the word’s meaning.

Find opportunities to use the word/s learnt in different situations. Create more teachable moments for your child to experience what they have learnt.

Writing

For upper primary children, encourage more reading for good writing skills.

Write with your child to improve their writing skill. Assist the child by giving pointers. Not only will this encourage self-expression, it will also deepen the bond between you and your child.

Decorate your house with your child’s writing and drawings. This is a great source of encouragement and affirmation. Repeat what your child says as they show you their artwork, and then build on and extend it.

encouraged to develop higher levels of language proficiency and culture knowledge (Higher Mother Tongue Language), while students who are facing difficulties are encouraged to sustain their interest with (Mother Tongue Language ‘B’). This curriculum stresses on building of the oral skills. Furthermore, teachers today are able to use multimedia skills to enrich the children’s

learning experience, generate and sustain their interest.”

At the end of the day, it doesn’t matter that it is taking some extra effort or that you have to wait a bit for the result. And hey, remember that you’re not alone in this as well. Madonna, Andre Agassi and Anotonio Banderas are among those raising bilingual children – and if they can do it, why shouldn’t you? ☆