

Bi- and Multilingualism for Children

For parents and educators of young children



For Parents and Educators,

As a parent, or an educator of young children, bringing up a child in a multilingual country like Singapore can raise many questions about learning different languages from a young age. This booklet aims to answer your questions about bi- and multilingualism for children.

In Singapore, the **Language Planning Policy** (LPP) would be known to most, or all, Singaporeans.

What exactly is the Language Planning Policy in Singapore?

The Bilingual Policy [1], implemented by the Singapore Government, encourages Singaporeans to be proficient in both the English language and their respective ethnic mother tongues, which include Mandarin Chinese, Malay, and Tamil.

The average Singaporean child is required to learn English as his first language and his Mother Tongue (MT) as his second language, as determined by his ethnicity.



In an increasingly globalized world, many parents of this generation would want their child to be the cream of the crop, and being multilingual is one way of putting your child in the limelight.

However, many myths and questions about both bilingual and multilingualism have been answered by many researchers in this field, but as normal parents, one would not use research papers as a form of entertainment to read in their free time.

Hence, this booklet is here to answer what you, as a parent or an educator, would wish to know about teaching young children and their language acquisition skills at a tender age.

What is Bilingualism and Multilingualism?

Some linguists have argued...



Bilinguals:

- Individuals who are very close to the proficiency of two monolinguals [17]

Multilinguals:

- Individuals who are able to function properly, at some level, in more than one language.

Does the learning of more languages affect a child's academic development?

Based on empirical research, the short answer is **no**.

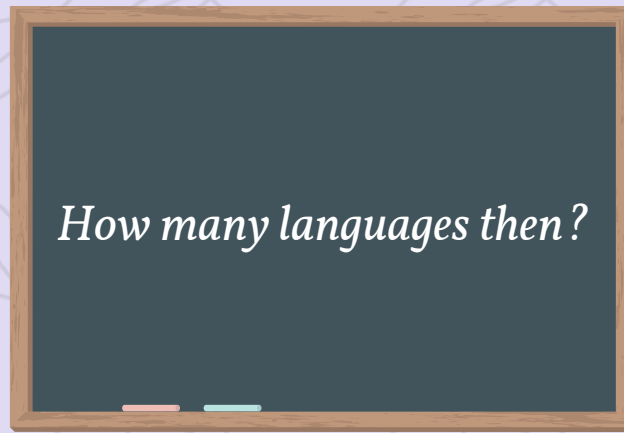
In fact, bilinguals are known to have more advantages compared to monolinguals.



Don't worry,

In the long-term perspective of a child's academic growth, the bi- or multilingual child is probably able to do well in school, as evidence show that bilingual speakers are more readily able to control their attention compared to monolingual learners [6].

So, your bilingual child is good to go!



There is no exact answer to this question -- it depends on what you want, as a parent, for your child.



We wish to note that there are very little studies done on multilingual speakers, so we are unable to explicitly encourage or discourage parents from letting their child learn as many languages as possible.



However, if you wish for your child to be a proficient multilingual, studies do show that learning new languages from a younger age helps with better language acquisition [7], especially so with working memory performance and bigger vocabulary size of other languages [8].

Classroom VS Natural Environment?



So which is better?

We would advise parents to let their child learn a language in a focused environment, so as to maximize the absorption of the new language, but at the same time, speaking to the child in that language outside the classroom would be more helpful in attaining better proficiency and understanding in the long-term.



Whilst it is recognized that indoor classrooms may be prominent in a child's learning and development [9], learning outside is seen as increasingly important and beneficial to a child's future and general well-being [10, 11].

Classroom:



The indoor classroom provides 'instructive learning environments and routines' indoors [9]

Natural:



Natural environment refers to the child acquiring a language through social interaction with speakers of that language.

Language exposure and Long-term retention?

Language Exposure

✧ Quality

It refers to the child having opportunities to interact with multiple different speakers. [12] This has been proven to have a positive effect on vocabulary learning. [13]

✧ Quantity

It refers to the number of words that children hear per day in each language. [12] For the child, hearing more words gives a greater opportunity to learn a language, which leads to later advantages in school performance. [14]

then what?

Considering these two aspects, parents should aim to maximize the quality and quantity of the language they want their child to learn.



Educators can also maximize these two aspects through talking to their students in higher quantity, so that the children are able to expand their vocabulary size more effectively as well.



With both high quality and quantity of language exposure, the child is more likely to retain more information about the language, be it growing in vocabulary size or reducing grammatical mistakes.



What if I want my child to learn a language that I do not speak?

Well.....

By sending your child to learn a language you are unable to speak at home, the quantity aspect of learning the language may be compromised for your child.



Although your child will still be able to pick up a new language, his mental dictionary of that language may be limited to school-related words, as there is little to no exposure to that language in the home environment.



Oh no!

But there's a way...



Perhaps, to facilitate a better learning environment for your child, you as the parent can even pick up a new language along with your child



Adults have a better efficiency, in terms of better cognitive processing [18] and ability for logical thought [19], for picking up a new language as well [15], albeit maybe at a slower rate than a child.



You should...

Learn a new language with your child!

It is likely to promote strong family bonds, and better acquisition of the language in the long-run.



For the full article, hop on to

<http://blogs.ntu.edu.sg/hg3017-2017/2017/11/28/bi-and-multilingualism-for-children/>

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