

**THIRD LANGUAGE  
DEVELOPMENT OF MIXED  
ETHNIC CHILDREN:  
*AN ADVANTAGE IN NEW  
LANGUAGE LEARNING***



*An early childhood guide for  
inter-ethnic parents*

## **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

In 2016, 21.5% of marriages were inter-ethnic, nearly a three times increase from 7.6% in 1990 [8]. Despite being a multi-ethnic country, older generations in Singapore may not be bilingual as the bilingual policy was only introduced to schools in 1960 [19]. To add on, primary education was not compulsory before 2003 [6]. Therefore, for pioneer generation Singaporeans, their home language is likely their Mother Tongue or dialects instead of English. Hence, aside from English, your child may have to learn the home languages of both parents in order to communicate with his grandparents.

This booklet is intended as a guide to help you understand third language learning for your child and the role you can play in your child's third language development at an early age.

Below is a checklist of frequently asked questions that will be answered later in this booklet.

- Will learning a third language hinder my child's language development?
- My child code mixes. Is he confused?
- When is a good age for my child to learn a third language?
- How can I help in my child's third language learning?

We hope that with this booklet you will better understand early childhood language development and can actively partake in your child's language learning.

## INTRODUCTION

Studies by Associate Professor Leher Singh from National University of Singapore published in the journal of Child Development showed benefits in early bilingualism [20, 21]. Besides a bilingual advantage in executive functions, bilingual children also demonstrate an edge in new language acquisition over monolingual children. Professor Singh's study in 2017 showed that bilingual infants have advantages in word learning in a third language [3, 20]. The results suggested that the prolonged sensitivity to sound contrasts helped bilingual infants in learning words in a third language which they had no prior exposure to [20].

Simultaneous bilinguals, who learn two languages from birth, have advantages over sequential bilinguals, who learn a first language followed by a second language subsequently. The former often have more native-like accents, know more vocabulary, achieve higher grammatical proficiency and are better in language processing [4]. Therefore, you can expose your child to a third language from as early as birth because earlier is better for language development. We will explain why this is so later in the booklet.

**Will learning a third language hinder my child's language development?**

**No, it does not. Whether two or three languages, your child will follow the same language learning trajectory as a monolingual child.**

The milestones of an infant whether early bilingual or monolingual follow the trajectory as seen in Table 1 below [14]. What is important for the growth in each language is the amount of exposure and experience.

Approximate month	Stage
4	Babbling discriminates speech sounds
10	Babbling reveals household language
12	One-word stage
24	Two-word, telegraphic speech
24+	Language develops rapidly into complete sentences

Table 1. Summary of language development

Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, bilinguals are better at executive functions [1]. One of them is inhibitory control. A bilingual child is able to inhibit one language when using another. This means that the child is able to select one language and “switch off” the other [18].

You may also find that the size of your child's English vocabulary is lagging behind his monolingual peers. Don't worry as this is normal. When acquiring three languages at the same time, the rate of development in each language will undoubtedly be slower than the rate of single language development in monolingual children [7]. Thus, instead of measuring vocabulary across the languages separately, you can measure the total vocabulary of your child across all three languages

as this is a better indicator to assess language development [1, 7]. In fact, the rate of growth of total vocabulary of bilingual children is equal or even greater than monolingual children [7].



## My child code mixes. Is he confused?

**No, code mixing is common in bilingual infants where they use words from two languages when they speak.**

This happens when the bilingual child is unable to find or recall the word they want to convey in the language they are speaking, and thus they borrow the word from the other language [3]. In fact, bilingual children treat the two languages as separate linguistic systems [7, 16, 18]. They are aware that they are learning two different languages as seen from how they accommodate to different interlocutors during conversations [15]. For example, a French-English bilingual child uses English more frequently with a monolingual English speaker and vice versa [15]. Therefore, code mixing does not mean that your child is unable to differentiate between the languages because how he selects a language to use is not random.

Another reason your child may be doing this is because you are doing it. Code mixing could be frequent in your language communities, and your child could have picked it up along the way [5]. Contrary to beliefs about code switching confusing your child and hampering his language acquisition, parental code switching actually does not have an adverse effect on your child's language development [2]. Whether you choose to code switch or refrain from code switching, it will still lead to successful acquisition of vocabulary in the end [15].



**When is a good age for my child to learn a third language?**

**Earlier is always better so start as early as possible.**

Adults like you and I are language bound listeners, and we can only discriminate the sounds of our language(s) but not foreign languages. However, unlike us, infants are universal listeners. In the first few months of age, they are able to discriminate all speech sounds in all languages [17]. For example, Japanese and American infants are able to discriminate /r/ and /l/ equally well at 6 to 8 months of age. This changes as they approach 1 year of age when they start producing their first word. Japanese infants start failing in the task while American infants perform better. This is because the Japanese babies start to become more attuned to the sounds of their native language as they grow older, and Japanese does not have a clear /r/ and /l/ distinction that English has.



Video 2. The linguistic genius of babies

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qRRiWg6wYXw>

In addition, language has a critical period as seen in Figure 3 [13]. As your child grows older, there is a decline in new language acquisition, and it will be harder for your child to learn a new language. Before the age of 7, children are geniuses when it comes to language learning. If you have missed the “critical period”, fret not because this does not mean that your child is unable to learn a third language. It just implies that the new language acquisition will be more challenging for your child. Nevertheless, with hard work and dedication, it is not impossible to acquire a third language. After all, learning never stops.

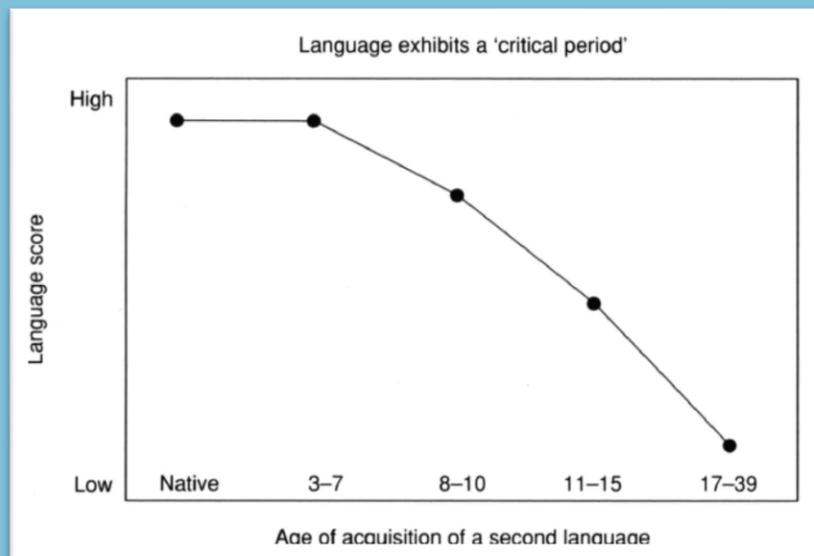
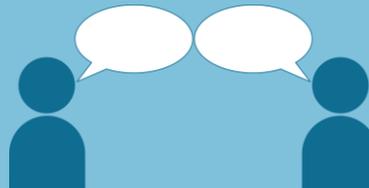


Figure 3. Relationship between age of acquisition of a second language and language score

## How can I help in my child's third language learning?

**Talk more, interact more, and play more.**

**T**alk more



Exposure is important for language acquisition. The video above mentioned that infants learn best with face to face exposure than over the screen or auditory exposure. The quantity and quality of input your child receives also play a crucial part in his language development [7]. Infants prefer and learn better with child-directed speech instead of adult-directed speech as it has varied vocabulary, syntax and decontextualised speech [7, 12].

Also, the more the merrier! Hearing a language from more speakers instead of a few for the same number of hours will help more in language development [7, 12]. By talking and using more vocabulary with your child, you will help your child build his vocabulary.

Book reading is another way for increasing exposure. Mothers produce more speech per unit of time during book reading [11]. The speech produced during that time has more complex structure, diverse vocabulary and generates more questions and less directives [11]. It also allows for more object labelling (e.g. This is a bear.) than during play activities [11].



## **I**nteract more

Another ingredient as important as input is the output by your child. As the saying goes, “practice makes perfect”. It will be good to let your child fumble and learn along the way. Whether bilingual or monolingual, all children will either over-extend word meaning (e.g. dog = any four-legged animal) or under-extend word meanings (e.g. dog = the family’s dog) when acquiring vocabulary [9]. Don’t fret even when your child says ‘runned’ instead of ‘ran’. This just shows that he is learning the grammar rule of adding the ‘ed’ morpheme at the end of a verb to represent past tense before he learns the irregular verbs. All in all, making mistakes is a natural part of language learning. Therefore, instead of using directives with your child, try phrasing your words in a way that will encourage conversation and elicit response.



1. Parent: Go to bed.  
*Child:*



2. Parent: Keep your toys.  
*Child:*

1. Parent: It's late now. What should you do?

*Child: Sleep.*

Parent: Where do you sleep?

*Child: On my bed.*

Parent: Where is your bed?

*Child: In the room.*



2. Parent: What are these on the floor?

*Child: Toys.*

Parent: What should you do after you are done playing with them?

*Child: Keep them away.*



# **P**lay more

Children need to play more and memorise less [10]. Play activities usually give rise to richer variation sets. These variation sets help children in language learning. Variation sets are partial self-repetitions [22]. The words repeat but in an intelligent repetition. From this, your child is able to separate the words. From the example below, 'cookies' is repeated but never in the same pattern. Therefore, the child will be able to separate the words into meaningful clusters.

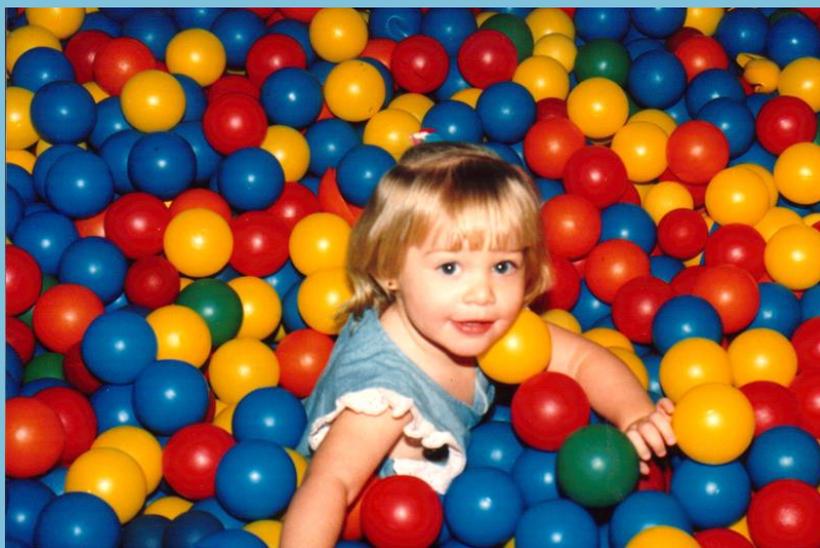
**(these are) cookies**

**(five) cookies**

**(five) (chocolate) cookies**

Figure 4. Example of variation sets

Language learning can be fun. Bring your child out and engage your child. Let your child absorb what the world has to offer in wide-eyed wonder. Here's a TIP! Talk more, interact more, and play more!



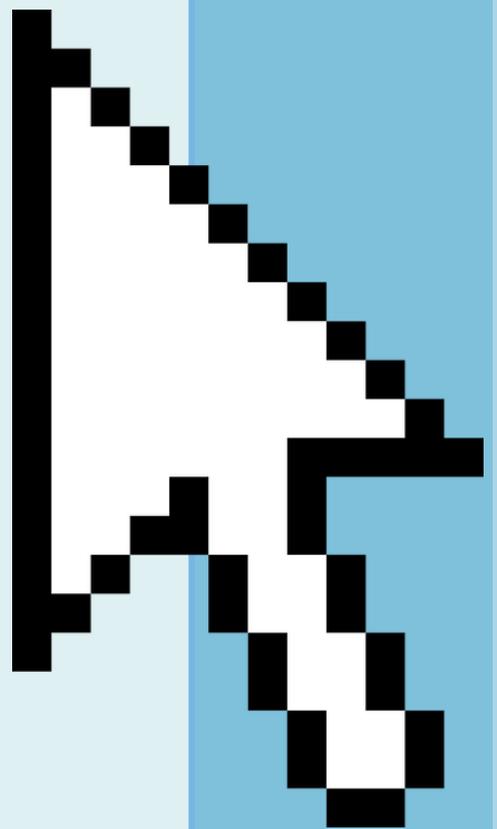
**You may want to check out some of the resources below!**

<https://www.schoolbag.sg/>

<https://www.koobits.com/2012/10/01/10-free-fantastic-websites-for-language-learning>

<http://www.stellarliteracy.sg/>

<http://www.nlb.gov.sg/discovereads/>



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