

SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION



CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT & LANGUAGE SETTING

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Note to Parents & Caregivers:

This parent information booklet is written with the Singapore multiracial and multilingual societal context in mind, as a reference for you when making certain language decisions for your child, particularly in the area of the classroom environment for second language acquisition. Do keep in mind that this is a general guide as every child is different when it comes to their learning style and how they can best pick up a second language!

Dictionary

L1: Child's first language
L2: Child's second language

Balanced Bilingual:
to have the same level of proficiency in both languages

Code-Mixing:
when child uses both languages in one figure of speech

Simultaneous Bilingual:
learns two or more languages at the same time

Sequential Bilingual:
learns one language before the other

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Introduction

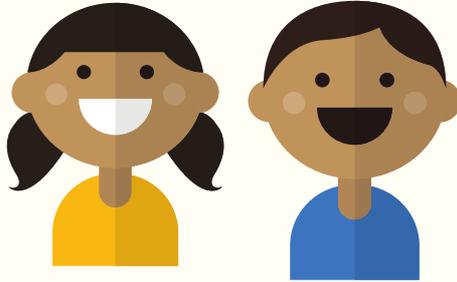
In the multilingual society that we live in in Singapore, most Singaporeans who undergo mainstream government education leave school as bilinguals, usually with English as their main language of communication, and their Mother Tongue language as their second language. Starting from preschool, children are already exposed to both English and their Mother Tongue language, and this bilingual education continues up to primary and secondary school.

Through this booklet, we hope to answer some questions that you parents might be asking as you start to explore different language learning pathways for your child.

In general, most Singaporean children would fall under two categories of bilinguals- the first- simultaneous bilingual children who have been exposed to both L1 and L2 since birth and have continued interactions in both languages, and the second- sequential bilingual children who have only been exposed to L1 and it is only in formal education that they receive exposure to L2.

The question at hand would then be whether classroom learning is sufficient for second language acquisition, and to answer this we will first have to understand the different conditions that make up a good learning environment for L2 for children.

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1 Outside of the classroom, does the child still use the language in everyday situations?

Stephen D. Krashen refers to this as the Great Paradox of Language Teaching, asserting that **“Language is best taught when it is being used to transmit messages, not when it is explicitly taught for conscious learning”** (Krashen, 1995). If the child only uses the language in the classroom, then it would be harder for the child to retain the information taught, be it in terms of vocabulary or syntax. Three things to consider can also be the mode of teaching, and the role of interaction between teacher and student, and also between students.

Interactions in the language that your child is learning would enable them to apply what they have learnt! Simply put, the more the child gets to use the language in and outside of the classroom, the easier it would be for her to pick up the language.

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school
class friends

2

What about the interest of the child?

Whether or not classroom learning is sufficient for second language acquisition would also depend on the interest of the individual student picking up the Mother Tongue language. Given that they do not have a choice in the language they are taking- most children simply follow the Mother Tongue language of either parent. Early exposure to the language might be helpful in this case, especially in the form of media such as cartoons or games, which capture children's attention fast. With the initial interest as a foundation, it would then be easier for teachers in schools to tap on that foundation and build upon it.

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Now that we have established that we will probably need more than just classroom teaching to help a child learn the L2, we'll explore what are some of the possible ways that parents can play a part in enriching the content taught in the classroom, and help their child apply it to real-life situations.

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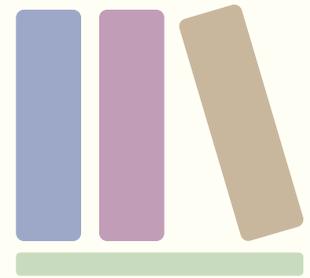
Research has also shown that the **quality of language and literacy** a child is exposed to in early childhood can be a strong indicator of their language proficiency later on in life, hence parents have an active role to play in raising a bilingual child even before formal education begins!

As seen in Hart and Risley's study, by the age of 3 the difference in vocabulary knowledge between two children can range up to 30 million words, which means that some children do get a head start as compared to others (Hart & Risley, 2003). If parents are bilingual as well, perhaps they can try to incorporate the use of L2 in everyday life (if it isn't already) so that the child is able to see the relevance of the language that they are learning in the classroom. This can come in the form of daily conversations, or reading together for those who are of a younger age.

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A study done by Foster and Miller have also shown that reading from a young age has benefits beyond increasing the child's vocabulary and competency in the language, whereby children who start school "rich in literacy or who are provided with the tools to develop their literacy skills" when

they are younger (in their development stage) have a higher probability of performing better in school on average compared to their peers who lack in this advantage (Foster & Miller, 2007).



Bilingual author of children's books, Alma Flor Ada points out that reading bilingual story books together with your child can be a good time of bonding, where the parent could read in one language and then encourage your child to read in the other, and look for cognates together if L1 and L2 are similar languages, such as Spanish and English, or to look out for words that are very different in forms as a kind of game with your child! Cognates are words with similar form and function, for example, car and *carro*.



Cognates:
words with a
common
etymological origin

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There is also the possibility that the parents might have a negative attitude towards their own mother tongue (be it due to personal, social or cultural reasons), and this might then rub off onto the child even before their learning of the language begins, and this could lead to them disliking the language. What then can you do as parents to prevent this from happening? Regardless of your personal experience and language ability, it would be best to maintain a neutral attitude towards the language, especially in front of your child! After all, children are a lot more sensitive and observant than we give them credit for.

Some of you parents might be concerned about the progress of your child's language learning, especially when there are many mixed conclusions in online articles regarding what is best for a child and what is considered "good" or "bad" learning habits, and hopefully this booklet has helped to debunk some of these myths and has enabled you to better make informed choices for your child!

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