

By Leher Singh

★ Commentary | [Commentary](#)

09 Jan 2018 12:14AM
(Updated: 09 Jan 2018 07:39AM)



Bookmark



Commentary: What hope do monolingual parents have in raising bilingual children?



A screengrab from an MOE video featuring a girl learning her mother tongue so she can communicate with her grandfather.

SINGAPORE: A series of [videos](#) promoting the use of mother tongues has recently been released by the Lee Kuan Yew Fund for Bilingualism.

These videos are intended to promote the use of mother tongues, stressing its importance in bridging connections with others and retaining a strong national identity.

The need for these videos may speak to some of the ambivalence and challenges families often face in raising bilingual children. Particularly in families where parents do not speak the mother tongue, they may feel overwhelmed and uncertain when it comes to figuring out how to raise a bilingual child.

Can parents who don't speak their mother tongue raise children who do?

And can they do so without resorting to expensive tuition classes?

Thankfully, research tells us that parents who do not speak two languages can raise bilingual children who become fully proficient in both languages.

However, unlike bilingual families, these parents will be more dependent on outside sources, such as childcare facilities, community resources, schools or tutors, to provide second language exposure and instruction.

WHO'S TEACHING THE MOTHER TONGUE?

For monolingual families, well-designed and effectively implemented bilingual education programmes can provide an excellent and sustainable route to bilingualism.

Bilingual education programmes that maintain best practices in second language instruction should be sufficient to build up mother tongue proficiency without the need for supplementary tuition.

But what distinguishes good bilingual education?



How can kids pick up their mother tongue if their parents are not fluent in the language, without recourse to expensive tuition classes? (Photo: Pixabay/weisanjiang)

The sheer amount of time that children hear a mother tongue predicts their eventual success. Children with longer exposure to the mother tongue go onto greater proficiency.

However, bilingual education is not just about clocking hours - it is also about how this time is being spent. In learning a mother tongue, it is good for children to have exposure and interaction with a variety of mother tongue speakers and for these interactions to be with fully proficient native speakers. Such speakers can provide the best language model for young learners.

So, the more the better, both in terms of time spent and the number of speakers encountered.

The success of mother tongue education relies on interaction with live partners. While many parents may be tempted to let the television playing cartoons or sitcoms in the mother tongue babysit children in the hope that kids will pick up the language with the passage of time, research shows children learn better from live interaction and conversation than passive media consumption.

The mode of instruction also matters, although some children draw more from spontaneous social opportunities whereas others draw more from more structured learning.

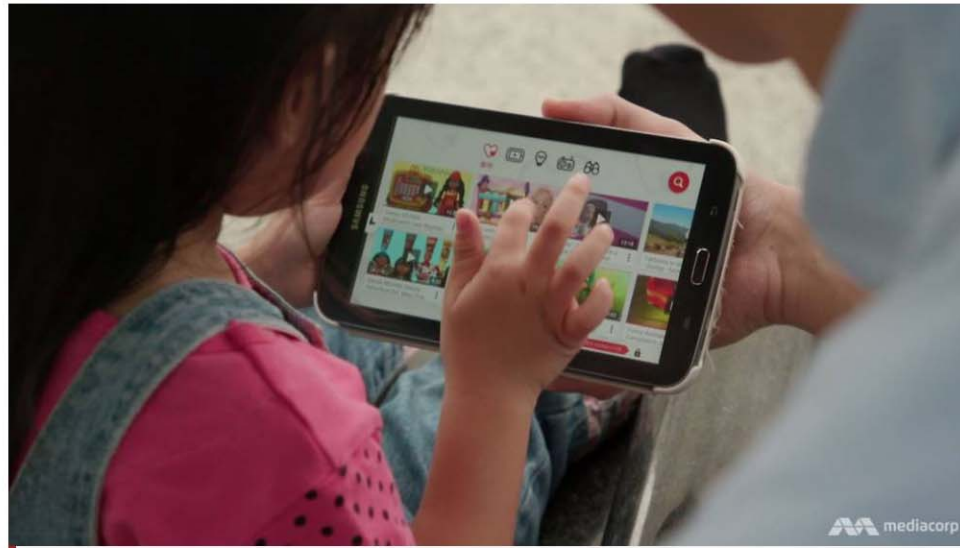
The reality is some children gravitate towards structured learning where they learn rules and word meanings, and armed with this knowledge, feel comfortable to engage in spontaneous conversation. Others much prefer spontaneous conversation and use these conversations to draw out rules and word meanings.

But crucial to both is a chance to interact and converse with a partner.

While mother tongue tuition can be helpful, a good bilingual education should suffice to build up native mother tongue proficiency.

Parents can also resort to social opportunities, such as interest groups via Meetup, or immerse themselves in cultural events at Community Centres to seek out opportunities for their children to use the mother tongue.

Parents can also actively support peer friendships and play opportunities with native speakers of a mother tongue. Children are typically less deterred by a language barrier with those they meet than adults and they are often very willing to enjoy play with another child with shared interests, even if they speak a different language.



The more the better, both in terms of time spent and the number of speakers encountered, in helping kids build up bilingualism.

Community and peer engagement will have to be a more active effort for monolingual families, but it is a worthy investment in their child's bilingual journey.

ARE KIDS MOTIVATED TO MASTER THEIR MOTHER TONGUE?

Research shows us that motivation for second language learning in children is more important than language learning ability in reaching bilingual proficiency. A child who is highly motivated to learn their mother tongue will typically fare much better than one who is not.

As parents often recognise, creating and sustaining motivation for the mother tongue can present one of the biggest challenges to teaching children their mother tongue.

Many children, even toddlers, simply refuse to talk in a mother tongue choosing to speak English, even though they understand their mother tongue. This is a common scenario that reflects in the child both a language preference and a selective appreciation for the usefulness of one language over the other.

But this barrier must be overcome so that kids don't stay passive bilinguals (children who understand two languages but only speak in one) but make progress to become active bilinguals.

The reality is that children cannot be pressured to interact in a mother tongue, nor can they be easily convinced of the logic of why learning an additional language is important.

Children are motivated to learn a language when they believe that the language is useful to them in their eyes. For example, many parents believe that learning Chinese is a strategic choice that will give their children opportunities in their future careers, yet this is not a line of reasoning that would readily appeal to a 5-year-old.

For this reason, good bilingual education programmes often have clever, creative ways to engage children in the host culture of a second language to enliven the experience of learning. For example, learning about interesting cultural practices or popular culture in the mother tongue can fuel a curiosity for the language in children.

While this is not directly teaching vocabulary or grammar, it is a crucial step towards building motivation that can bolster an uptake of vocabulary and grammar.

But if one language is actively used in a child's life to converse in school, maintain friendships and family bonds, and access the ever-appealing world of entertainment while the other language is confined to textbooks and homework exercises, then both languages will start to mean different things.

The child may naturally gravitate towards the language that they actively use at the cost of the second language, limiting a child from realising their bilingual potential.

But a child who views their knowledge of a second language as a means towards forging important social bonds, pursuing their own hobbies or interests, or making valued cultural connections in their life will be more likely to persevere in the hard work of learning another language more than a child who sees a second language as just another examinable subject.



Will our kids see mother tongue as merely another examinable subject, to the detriment of building up bilingualism? (Photo: TODAY)

BILINGUALISM A FAMILY AFFAIR

Finally, as with all aspects of learning, children learn within the bounds of their own “ecosystem”. A child raised in a family environment where bilingualism is valued and prioritised by the parents – even if they are not providing bilingual input at home - is more likely to become bilingual than one whose family holds an indifferent view towards bilingualism.

Many monolingual parents often approach bilingualism in a direction that is less than ideal. Specifically, we teach word by word. In other words, we hope that children will learn words in a Mother tongue to be able to access the “world” of the Mother tongue. But it can be equally important for children to be drawn to the “world” of the mother tongue in a way that makes them want to learn the words.

Children inherit their parents’ attitudes in many respects, and bilingualism is no exception.

For monolingual and bilingual families alike, developing a sustainable and consistent family language policy where each member of the family agrees upon and actively supports bilingual acquisition can greatly benefit a child.

This can mean actively seeking to create opportunities for children to engage in their mother tongue by attending community events or by forging partnerships with peers and neighbors to encourage mother tongue use.

Family language policies vary greatly depending on the languages spoken by each member of the family and on what works best for an individual child. There is no one-size-fits-all solution for all children.

What is important is that children receive similar amounts of high-quality exposure and interaction opportunities for both languages and that children see the relevance and appeal of both languages in their lives.

Leher Singh is director for the National University of Singapore’s Infant and Child Language Centre and Associate Professor of Psychology.

Source: CNA/sl