

Guest Editor's Note:

Bilingual Education for Young Children: Recent Research

Jamie Wallin, Ph.D.*

Professor Emeritus, The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, BC Canada V6T 1Z4
Faculty of Education, Rangsit University, Thailand
E-mail: rsu.wallin@yahoo.ca

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This is the first of a two-part Guest Editor's Note. Part One (this issue) reviews briefly the state of knowledge about second language learning. Three key facts about bilingual education and young children will be addressed: second language learning is never too early, never too much, and, in addition, offers non-linguistic benefits (Byers-Heinlein, 2013).

The second part (in a future RJAS issue) will report on the status of second language learning in the schools of selected countries in Southeast Asia.

Childhood bilingualism: earlier is better. Many teachers and parents in Asian countries are becoming more and more aware of the importance of children learning English. The increasing use of English on food and clothing labels, on store fronts, and transportation facilities (airports, bus and train stations, for example) will not have escaped their attention. School children, too, nowadays are often exposed to English when they watch their favourite TV cartoons or commercials, or when they go to a newly released film at the local cinema, or peruse books in the school library or in book stores.

Even paediatricians and speech-language therapists are being consulted about when is a good time for children to be learning a second language such as English (Byes-Heinlein & Williams, 2013).

So, when is a good time? The research is clear: there is a decline in language learning abilities with age (Hakuta, Bialystok, & Wiley, 2003). It seems that children's brains are more adaptive to language learning earlier (than later) in life.

In their early years children are exposed to language from morning till night. They are picking up the sounds, the words and phrases of their home language. Such learning is known as simultaneous language learning. It is a powerful and efficient method.

Second language learning, on the other hand, is most often in a classroom, and only in short time frames and only on certain days. Such learning is known as sequential language learning.

It is only logical (and supported by scientific research) that simultaneous language learning is the more effective. Some parents (those who can afford the expense) choose to hire bilingual nannies or send their child to a bilingual preschool, in the hope of achieving the same degree of fluency as is possible in first language learning (Piroon, 2016). Such a child will have better accents and a more diversified vocabulary, among many other advantages.

*Editorial Board Member Jamie H. A. Wallin, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus, The University of British Columbia (Canada) and currently Visiting Professor, International College, Rangsit University.

Childhood bilingualism: countering exposure to the majority language. Children do not live in isolation from their surroundings. These include the people who operate shops and food outlets and who provide transportation services, for example. All of them use the majority language – be it Thai or Lao or Khmer, for example. For this reason, language experts recommend that bilingual students should receive slightly more exposure to the minority (or target) language (English, for example) in their early years, than to the (majority) language of the community.

Also, it is highly desirable that children in bilingual programmes have regular opportunities to enjoy target language movies and TV programmes. And, where possible, participate in exchanges with children and adults who speak the target language (English, for example) (Pearson, 2008).

What is required, then, is some balance between exposure to the majority and the minority language. Children who have exposure to both languages will learn more easily the words and grammar in each language and thus exhibit greater fluency (Lanza, 2004).

Childhood bilingualism: non-linguistic benefits? Recent researchers have shown that children who are in the process of becoming bilingual are also acquiring certain advantages over their monolingual counterparts (Akhtar & Menjivar, 2012). The list is quite extensive. Among them are the following:

- exhibit better skills in understanding others, a form of empathy (Kovács, 2009)
- show an increased sensitivity to tone of voice (Yaw & Markman, 2011)
- more able to switch between activities (Bialystok & Martin, 2004)
- more able to generalize information from one event to a later event (Brito & Barr, 2012)
- reveal lower levels of ethnocentrism (James, 2015)

Two of the foremost specialists in early bilingualism conclude that second language learning is possible at any age, however, earlier is better than later, and, quantity of exposure matters (Byers-Heinlein & Lew-Williams, 2013).

The *Rangsit Journal of Arts and Sciences* would welcome papers that focus on issues concerning second language education and implications for university teaching, particularly in Asian countries.

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