



Learning English as a Second Language: Earlier is Better

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This research note reviews recent evidence concerning childhood bilingualism: what is the optimal age to begin learning a second language? Acquiring a first language is mainly unconscious and begins at birth. A bilingual child is one who has acquired a second language simultaneously or is acquiring a second language sequentially. Research evidence confirms that second language acquisition should begin as early as possible. It requires a holistic approach in which learners are immersed in the sounds and daily experiences of the second language, much in the same way as the first language was acquired. It is during the very early years of a child's life that brain development is most receptive to acquiring linguistic competence in one or more additional languages. Evidence is clear that younger-age learners will have better accents and a more diversified vocabulary than those who are older. Thus, creating an immersion-like environment is essential for schools which aim to develop sequential bilinguals. Elements for successful English as a second language programmes are identified, with supporting research evidence.

Keywords: First language learning, Language acquisition, Simultaneous bilinguals, Sequential bilinguals, Holistic approaches

INTRODUCTION

This research note has two principal objectives. The first is to examine the latest research findings concerning when is the best time for children to acquire English as a second language and thus become bilingual. The second is to describe how this can be accomplished in a bilingual school setting. To elaborate further on the first objective: at what age should schools admit children into a bilingual programme, if the aim is to assist them to reach a level of competency in English that equals or nearly equals the competency level they are concurrently acquiring in their first (or home) language? Included in this research note are key organisational details, including teaching strategies, which are characteristic of bilingual schools which aim to produce bilingual children. First, it is important to clarify the difference between 'language learning' and 'language acquisition' and what is the difference between 'being bilingual' and 'being fluent'.

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Language Acquisition or Language Learning?

What is the difference between acquiring a language, and learning a language? Acquiring a language refers to an unconscious process, as when children acquire their home or first language. This process consists of the parents (or other adults) communicating with the child through daily interactions at home and in the community on a daily basis (Baker, 2006).

That process is natural and unconscious and begins at birth (Krashen, 1973). However, recent research reveals that the process actually begins in utero in the as-yet-unborn child (Moon et al., 2013). The acquisition of a child's first language continues when the child enters a school at age six, or less formally in a pre-school setting, such as a toddler's programme or a kindergarten. Learning a language is a more deliberate process as when a child enters a bilingual school. In the case of six-year old children who are enrolled in a bilingual programme, they are not only involved in second language studies, they are also beginning to learn other subjects such as mathematics and social studies in their first language and a second language (Lowry, 2015).

Thus, acquiring English as a second language is rarely a singular activity. However, in the case of many international schools, English is the medium of instruction. Of course, in many such schools, children have the option of studying formally their own (first) language. In bilingual schools where English is the target second language, normally the national language and English would be the two languages of instruction for core subjects such as mathematics and science (Piroon, 2016).

Being Bilingual or Being Fluent

It takes time to become really fluent in any language – if by 'fluent' one means speaking, reading, and writing at a reasonably good level. Only a minority of persons can become 'very proficient' even in their first language (Lowry, 2015). And, of course, the same is true for learning a second language. One way to describe the difference between being bilingual and being fluent is in the following quote :

"It is almost like memorizing your times tables. It can feel like second nature [to some], but . . . many experience forgetting what 7 x 8 is." It is 56. Similarly, those who are fluent in Spanish, for example, may need to occasionally refresh themselves on when to use "por" vs "para" (both mean 'or' in English, but are used for different situations in Spanish) . But being bilingual means you can think in either language easily, and misusing 'por' would be akin to saying something like "There are fewer snow in Florida than in New York" (Norman, 2017).

A person fluent in English may confuse 'less' and 'fewer', but a native or true bilingual speaker would not make that mistake. Norman (2017) makes the point that to be bilingual is to have mastered two or more languages. Bilingual speakers have the same competency in two or more languages as native speakers of those languages. As such, to become truly bilingual is not an easy process, but it is possible.

Regarding the matter of being fluent in a second language is to say that the person has developed good communication skills in, say, conversation. Or, has acquired strong skills in reading or in understanding speakers of a second language. In reality, not many people have the time to acquire high level skills in all areas of a second language. It should be noted

though, that such speakers are not bilingual. Their second-language skills are not as deeply rooted as in the case of bilinguals . Over time, without numerous opportunities to practice or refresh those second-language skills, fluency levels become seriously weakened.

Children who learned English as a second language will have considerable difficulty in maintaining their English skill levels in later years. In order to maintain their earlier skill levels, they will find it necessary to enroll in refresher courses or find opportunities to meet regularly with English speakers, for example (Baker, 2006).

In many Asian countries English is still very much a language of the few. This can result in an absence of features such as English signage and street names, and English TV and radio programmes, for instance. Thus, the surrounding environment in which children lead their lives is devoid of any reminders that there are other languages besides their own. The authors wonder whether this can result in a lack of curiosity about other languages, and, thus, a lower motivation to become bilingual, for example.

Brain Development

In order to fully grasp the process of language learning, it is useful to examine recent research in brain development. This could "shed some light" on when is the best time to begin the process of acquiring a second language.

Kotulak (1997), a Pulitzer Prize winning author, assembled scientific findings on how the brain develops in the early life of humans. Brain research data show that in the first month, newborns develop new synaptic connections at the rate of up to three billion per second. "Everything that a baby hears, sees, feels, tastes, and touches is absorbed by the brain and stored in its memory cells." By 6-8 months, according to Kotulak's review of research, the baby's brain has about 1,000 trillion synaptic connections. Later, the number of connections begins to diminish. And, by age 10, half of the connections have died off in the average child. Prior to that the brain has been like a sponge. It is during this period of brain development that the foundations have been set for thinking, language, vision, attitudes, aptitudes and other characteristics. Kotulak states, "After this stage of development, the windows close; the fundamental architecture of the brain is complete" (Kotulak, 1997). His conclusion underlines the importance of beginning second language learning as soon as possible .

Earlier researchers argued that at this stage (ages 11 or 12) a child could more easily understand what teachers are teaching, and therefore would more likely seem to make progress more quickly than a younger child. While this may be true, other researchers point out that a child who is first exposed to a second language at this later stage (11 or 12 years of age) will not intrinsically learn it in the same way a younger aged child would.

These later findings would suggest that 'earlier is better'; second language skills will be more authentic, and more

durable (Byers-Heinlein and Lew-Williams, 2013).

That is why, according to Kotulak, most older second language learners can never properly roll their ‘Rs’ as Scottish children can, nor pronounce Xhose (an African ‘click’ language), nor pronounce the ‘X’ sound of Chinese, or the ‘Th’ of English, for example. But, these unique language markers can be acquired easily by the very young. In the case of teenagers and adult late learners, those sounds are extremely difficult (if not impossible) to produce. More recently, researchers such as Chapelton (2016). He claims that the window for language learning closes even earlier – as early as age 6 or 7. And, they conclude that the best age to start learning a second language is essentially from birth, or as early as possible thereafter.

Bilingualism at an Early Age: Impact on Early Cognitive Development

The possibility that early bilingualism could affect (negatively) children’s language and cognitive development was for many years a concern for parents and educators. In an earlier time, the prevailing view was that bilingualism and second-language acquisition early in life made children confused and actually interfered with the development of cognitive functioning. Studies of language development among children have shown conclusively that such is not the case.

Since 1996, bilingual education is mandated for Singaporean children. They are required to begin school at six years of age where the language of instruction is English. In addition to English, children in Singapore are required to learn Chinese (Mandarin) and become proficient in their family’s language, too. Three home languages are recognised: Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil (the language of South India). Those children whose families speak Malay must study Malay; those whose families speak Tamil must study Tamil. These languages are taught by native speakers (Singapore, 2017). Thus, Singapore children are learning to read and write their home language, as well as English and Chinese (if these latter two languages are not their home languages).

According to the 2015 census, only 36.9% of children come from homes where English is the language most often used. Because English is the language of instruction, many non-English speaking parents choose to have their child attend a local preschool. Preschools exist everywhere. Parents are keen to have their children well-prepared to pass the compulsory English entrance test which is administered at the beginning of formal schooling. Thus, at age six, the majority of Singapore children can understand and speak English at a level commensurate with their age (Low, 2013).

Singapore’s comprehensive policy on second language learning has been in effect for more than 20 years. There has been no reported evidence of a negative impact on cognitive development among its children. It could be argued that the impact may be actually advantageous. Linguistic competencies of Singaporeans have been increasing. The 2010 census revealed that 79.9% of all Singaporeans were literate in English,

and, 70.5% were literate in two or more languages (Low, 2013).

PISA and Singapore

The 2016 PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) test results revealed that Singapore had the highest achieving 15-year olds among more than 70 advanced economies. They had the highest scores in all three test subjects: math, reading, and science (Coughlan, 2016).

[The PISA tests are developed and administered by the OECD (Organisation for Economic and Cultural Development), one of the special agencies of the United Nations.]

This is another example which appears to confirm that cognitive development of Singapore children has not been negatively impacted by learning a second or third language.

Word Mixing: Evidence of Confusion?

Another concern many parents and some educators have had about early bilingualism is that learners would become confused. There would be ‘language mixing’, that is, children would use words from the second language when speaking their first language, and vice versa. At that time the body of scientific research on bilingualism in children was relatively small (Wei, 2000). The question is whether the fact that bilingual children who mix words from two languages in the same sentence is ‘evidence’ of confusion. The research is clear: ‘code’ mixing is a normal part of bilingual development. Studies have shown that mixing is also a feature of bilingual adults (Pearson, 2008).

Also, it is important to note that young children (both monolinguals and bilinguals) have as yet **only limited vocabularies**. Thus, when **young** bilinguals ‘borrow’ words from the other language could be regarded as being very resourceful, not confused. Word mixing is a normal phenomenon of both simultaneous and sequential bilinguals (Lanza, 2004).

Simultaneous versus Sequential Bilinguals

The term ‘simultaneous bilinguals’ refers to those who grew up in a two-language environment, that is, in a community where they were exposed on a daily basis to two or more languages. The term ‘sequential bilinguals’ refers to individuals who learned their second language as children, or later as adults, after having acquired their first or home language.

Byers-Heinlein and Lew-Williams (2013) report that simultaneous bilinguals “tend to have better accents, more diversified vocabulary, higher grammatical proficiency, and greater skill in real-time language processing.”

The challenge for bilingual school educators is to provide an environment that approximates as closely as possible the environment of first language acquisition.

'Surround-Sound' and Acquiring a Second Language

Acquiring a second language, such as English, happens more naturally, and more easily, when one is surrounded by that language – especially when one is very young. This is most certainly true in the acquiring of one's first language. It appears to be equally true in acquiring a second (or third) language.

Thus, if bilingual schools are to succeed in their mission of helping monolingual students become sequential bilingual students, it seems clear that the learning environment should simulate as closely as possible the environment in which their students acquired their first language: a 'surround-sound' environment.

It is important to recall that children, from the time of their birth, are surrounded by the language of their family, friends, and relatives. The children's environment includes meal-time conversations, TV programmes, visits to grandparents, chatting with playmates in the neighbourhood, and pre-school programmes. They are immersed in their home language.

Schools which aim to provide a truly 'bilingualrela' education are thus challenged to provide an environment that mimics the one in which children experienced when acquiring their first language (Schmid, 2016) (Piroon, 2016). The critical time for second language acquisition is when a child is young – as young as the 'toddler' stage. It is useful to remember that :

- children can spend more time and effort on learning a second language than adults, who have many competing demands
- the motivation of young children to comply with school rules and routines, and to fit in, is much higher than that of older children
- the habits of pronunciation and word order of children's first language are **less deeply ingrained**, and thus easier to overcome (Schmid, 2016).

Acquisition of a second language, such as English, can be achieved by a number of ways. One way for parents of older children would be to consider study abroad opportunities. Many schools in countries such as the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia offer study programmes that include boarding (also known as 'home stay') options. This way is a viable one for families who have the financial resources to do so, and whose children are old enough to live comfortably apart from their families for an extended period of time – perhaps 6 or more months.

Another way would be to search for a bilingual school near to the family home. It is advisable to choose a school which offers a full range of classes, including an accredited secondary school programme. The major advantage of choosing such a school is that transitions between various levels of education – pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, primary, and secondary – are less disruptive.

Sequential Bilingualism: Some Elements of a Model Nursery School

Many bilingual schools will have a nursery section which simulates a child's home environment. This section outlines and explains the operation of a typical nursery school, beginning with the all-important question about the best age for beginning the process of second language acquisition. **Figure 1** shows the learning activities in the Early Childhood programme at Satit Bilingual School of Rangsit University.

How old?

Second language learning should start early – as young as 2 years old. One indicator of readiness would be when a child is comfortable in a new environment, that is, one which is different from their normal, everyday surroundings. The child would be excited by the prospect of being transported daily to an entirely new environment, a school or nursery, that feels warm and safe, and where the adults are friendly and caring, similar to a home environment.

Established bilingual schools are recommended, especially if they are in the vicinity of the family home. It is advisable, too, to choose a school that offers a full range of classes, including accredited secondary school programmes. The advantages of such schools include that of easy transitions among various levels of education: pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, primary, and secondary.

Nursery school environment

The nursery section of accredited bilingual schools will endeavour to create an environment which attempts to simulate that of one in which children have been acquiring their first language : no-threat, warm and trusting. It is important for the child to feel comfortable and happy.

The classroom should provide space for students to roam around. Less furniture is better than more furniture. A room with tables and chairs can be constraining to not only their body, but the mind as well. Several low round tables for group work is recommended; no chairs are needed. At this age, children can be quite comfortable sitting on the floor. As the tables are round, students will face each other, as well as the teacher supervising such activity. This helps encourage the social interaction, and thus enhances their language development.

When not needed, these tables can be moved aside, providing more free space for other teacher-led activities, or students' own activities such as manipulating building blocks or tracks. This also allows students to freely walk over to ask for help from a teacher or from another student. It is common to see children being close with their teachers – even hugging – during their free activity time.

Lunch time and playground activities are important for non-structured language development. Lunch time, especially when the tables are round in shape, and when there are not more than 10 or 12 children at each table is ideal for this purpose. The atmosphere during this period is when students can converse freely and even carry on nonsense conversations.



FIGURE 1 | Children in the Early Childhood programme at Satit Bilingual School of Rangsit University

They enjoy chatting with their teachers.

It is a time also for learning the names of food items, table manners, and even some simple facts about nutrition. It promotes simultaneous language learning whereby the English teacher and the Thai teacher can work together in the dual language acquisition process.

Toddlers will normally be immersed in a two-language environment for some 6-plus hours per day, or 30-40 hours per week: a variety of activities, snacks, milk breaks, lunches, and nap times. Their young brains are acquiring new vocabulary, expressions, and grammatical structures in Thai and in English in an unconscious way. This point has been confirmed in many studies. See for example, <https://vivaling.com/will-child-forget-language-learnt-early-childhood/>

The ratio of native speakers of the target language to speakers of the children’s home language needs careful consideration. In the case of a nursery, there should be both native and English speakers (when English is the other target language). The question of ratio in the case of early childhood education was addressed by [Perlman et al. \(2017\)](#). In a search of the literature they found that opinions varied from 5 to 14.5 children per adult. They also mentioned that UNICEF (United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund) recommended 15

children per teacher with a group size of less than 24.

Kindergarten

When children turn three years of age , an appropriate age for starting a kindergarten programme, a more formal teaching and learning environment can be introduced. These young learners can be then grouped into classes – usually not more than 24 in size, under the supervision of 3 adults.

Thus, dual language learning is gradually and almost imperceptibly being acquired with the help of one native English speaker, supported by two adults who speak the native language of the children , one of whom should have special training as a teacher or support staff member.

The Curriculum

Since the kindergarten ’s mission is to prepare learners for the more formal Primary School, the curriculum is more structured and appropriate to the age of the children.

Leading school systems such as the Ontario Ministry of Education (Canada) advocate ‘ play-based learning in a culture of inquiry ’. This, it is argued, provides the foundation for acquiring skills in literacy, mathematics, including problem solving, and in creativity. Full details are available at <https://w>

ww.ontario.ca/document/kindergarten-program-2016/appendix-overall-expectations-related-specific-expectations [Note: Ontario's 15-year olds scored in the top ten of the world according to the most recent PISA ranking.]

In a module wherein the focus is on the teaching of numbers between 1 and 10, the local teacher will have learners recognize what each number looks like, review how each number sounds in the national language, and help them write each number.

During this time, the second language teacher, English, for example, will be present, helping and talking to the children. Then, when it is time for the second language lesson, the English teacher will teach the sound of each number in English, and play games using those numbers. The local teacher will help out in the same way as the English teacher did previously. In this way, both languages are being incorporated into the teaching of numbers. The local teacher will use the native language of the children to communicate with students; the English teacher will use only English. In this way, students become accustomed to hearing and using both languages.

The teachers, both the local and English, should be well-trained and aware of their role as language teachers – and should hold appropriate qualifications. In addition to being conversant with the kindergarten curriculum, the teachers should possess high nurturing skills, have a loving disposition, be patient and understanding, and enjoy working with young children.

Kindergarten director/supervisor

The supervisor should be a specialist in early childhood education and knowledgeable about bilingual education – particularly the processes by which young children learn second languages.

Another important qualification for the supervisor is that of being a bilingual person and thus able to work with the English and the local teachers. Bilingual supervisors can help resolve issues like misunderstandings between the two sets of teachers.

Parents

In addition to the supervisor's work in the kindergarten itself, another very important role is that of serving as the intermediary between the kindergarten teachers and the parents. Parents are often quite concerned about what they can do to help with second-language learning.

It is important that the Director helps parents understand the importance of their continuing to provide a nurturing home environment – along with the continuing development of the family language.

Unlike so-called 'International Schools', bilingual schools have a dual responsibility: to nurture and provide instruction in the child's family language as well as in the target second language. Many international schools do not offer instruction in a child's home language. Children are obliged to use only the new language, English, for example, both in class and outside

of class. This can result in their becoming relatively illiterate in their national language.

It is important that the director and teachers in bilingual schools encourage parents to continue communicating with their child using their home language. It is in the home environment that children participate in family life that includes relatives and the people in their communities. This will ensure that bilingual education will proceed quietly and unconsciously with a minimal risk of impugning the importance of children's home language.

For a fuller discussion, on this point consult:

<http://www.hanen.org/helpful-info/articles/bilingualism-in-young-children--separating-fact-fr.aspx>

CONCLUSIONS: SOME ASSURANCES

Several assurances emerge from this review of research on when is the best time to begin learning a second (or third) language. Parents can be assured that it is never too early to begin second language learning.

Early exposure to the second language is important: very young children learn a second (or third) language through listening to and interacting with different speakers – exposure to sounds, words, and grammars of the language(s) they will use in the future (Wallin, 2017).

Some parents, who have the financial means and who wish their child to begin to learn a second language, such as English, may opt to hire an English-speaking nanny, or, an au pair. [Information about au pair agencies in various countries may be found by consulting the following: <https://www.iapa.org/en/au-pair-agencies/index.php>]

Of course, parents may prefer to enroll their child in a reputable (licensed) pre-kindergarten programme that offers a second-language environment. Alternatively, parents may wish to consider a bilingual school that has a pre-kindergarten and 'nursery' unit, preferably within a larger, more comprehensive facility. Such a choice would facilitate at least a smoother, less stressful transition from the pre-kindergarten stage to higher levels: kindergarten and primary, and from primary to secondary.

Some Assurances for Bilingual Education Professionals

Philosophers and scientists are well-known for cautioning against declaring something as a certainty. They argue that there are few (if any) certainties in the world. However, the research is clear on when is the best time to begin learning a second language: 'earlier is better'.

Education professionals can be confident in advising parents to enroll their child in a pre-kindergarten programme, especially if the parent's aim is to have their child become a sequential bilingual, that is, as competent in the second lan-

guage as in the first language.

Parents should locate a pre-school where the daily activities are holistic in nature, where the classrooms resemble a second ‘home’ consisting of ‘family and friends’ and the environment is full of the sounds and sights associated with that second language. Additionally, Parents should continue using their home language however with more care, that is, using ‘good quality’ vocabulary and grammar with much less use of slang and idiomatic expressions. (Such aspects of language can be easily learned on the playground and from listening to television programmes, for example.). Bilingual education professionals should advise parents that their role as parents should continue. No changes. Acquiring all the nuances of the child’s home language is very important.

In sum, parents should be encouraged to continue their normal home life (Byers-Heinlein and Lew-Williams, 2013). It should be noted, however, that children from lower socio-economic backgrounds may lack certain linguistic experiences in terms of vocabulary size, and lack of exposure to books, conversation practice, or first-hand life experiences. Brooke (2017) argues that such children are significantly behind their peers in language acquisition and will need such gaps remedied. Thus, staffing a pre-kindergarten programme, which caters to such children, should include competent, trained personnel fluent in the children’s home language, to begin to remedy such deficiencies.

Balance and Counterbalance

This research project had two purposes: bringing together some of the more recent findings about when is the best time for acquiring a second language. What are some essentials for schools which provide a bilingual programme. The authors have tried to do this in a simple, straight forward manner for easy reading by parents, educators and others who have an interest in second language development and learning.

Internationalisation is one of the factors that has intensified the importance of the new generation becoming competent in least two languages. Baker (2006) states that ‘As swift communication by phone and computer across great distances has become possible in recent decades, and as air travel has brought countries closer together, so the importance of bilingualism

and multilingualism has been highlighted. His argument is that the ease of delivering information has increased dramatically, so bilinguals, particularly those with ‘English bilingualism’ have a distinct advantage in the employment market. Baker (2006) identifies twelve fields where English competency is in demand.

- Tourism
- Marketing
- Retailing
- Accountancy
- Hotels
- Information and communications technology
- Airlines
- Public relations
- Banking
- Law
- Teaching
- Secretarial work

Ministries of Education and professional educators, particularly in countries where English is not the principal language of instruction, are challenged to improve and expand second language learning opportunities for more and more children especially young children (Setyaningrum, 2007). It is with this group of children, the very young, where a significant increase in investment in second language education will yield the greatest benefits. The benefits will accrue not only to the children themselves and their families, but also to the nation.

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