

## Acquiring A Second Language Without Sacrifice of Mother Tongue

Wenqian He\*

University of Melbourne

\*Corresponding author: milkyhe66@163.com

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**Abstract:** Acquiring English is compulsory for Chinese students but some of them are facing biliteracy problems. This article analyzes the current situations of Chinese English learners and concludes that there are three critical issues about early bilingual literacy: the loss of mother tongue, first language and second language conflicts and language education under suspicion. To solve this problem, a well-designed dual-language program is needed.

### 1. Introduction

In 1986, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China released the *Decisions on the Reform of China Education System*. This document outlined the educational goal of ‘realizing nine-year compulsory education step by step’. According to this document, all of the Chinese students have the right and obligation to receive free nine-year compulsory schooling (Zhang & Mingxia, 2006). This policy has been implemented throughout the education reform. At the end of 2002, the goal of realizing universalize compulsory education has primarily achieved and English classes have been introduced to universal nine-year compulsory education (Zhang & Mingxia, 2006). In 2010, China already has 400 million English learners (Bolton, 2010). English learners grow rapidly with the development of China. English is not the property of native-English speaker countries because it has been considered as a world language (Blommaert, 2010). Since 2001, Chinese students in Grade 3 (8 or 9 years old) have to learn English as a compulsory subject. I started learning English when I was 9 years old. However, after I went to school, I found that I was the only student who didn’t learn English before. My classmates were sent to learn English before traditional schooling. English becomes so important in China nowadays. In the National University Entrance Qualifying Exam (or Gaokao), English, Chinese and Math are three compulsory tested subjects (Wang,2007). After almost 12 years of English learning experience, I found that my English is better than most of my classmates although they learn English early and longer than me. Also, I found that my classmates who achieve academic success in Chinese also could perform well in English examines (Gaokao). It involves some conflicts about learning the mother language and acquiring English as a second language. In this essay, I am going to analyze the biliteracy problems faced by young English learners in China and the relationships between English and Chinese. Based on the analysis, I draw on a conclusion that well-organized dual language programs are needed because those programs give the first language and the second language relatively equal access, and it could improve children biliteracy without sacrifice of their mother tongue.

### 2. Why people learn a second language?

Bilingualism has positive effects on children’s linguistic and language understanding. Compared with monolingual, children who continue developing two or more language abilities get a better understanding of languages (Cummins, 2001). They are exposed to more than one language, so they have access to other culture and knowledge. This language advantage gives them extra opportunities to practice both literacies and make a comparison between different language systems. As Goethe, a German philosopher, said: the person who knows only one language doesn’t truly know that language (Cummins,2001). Bilingual children develop a deeper understanding of languages due to the process

of their different languages systems (Cummins,2001). Language is the key to other culture and nations, so bilingual children could get access to other cultures and knowledge. It improves their understanding of different languages.

Besides, bilingualism improves brain development. Bilingualism and multilingualism endow individuals with better problem-solving abilities, cognitive abilities and advanced lexical speed (Adesope, et al., 2010; Higby, Junga, & Obler et al., 2013). Those advantages are soft-abilities for individuals. Non-monolingual could analyze information from different language context and then generate deeper understanding. Through Multilanguage exposure, multilingual students can understand more complex texts and achieve better academic outcomes (Adesope, et al., 2010; Higby, Junga, & Obler et al., 2013). Their learning abilities improves with the advancement of their language. An individual who is facilitated with more than one language has more work and learning opportunities than monolingual peers because of language advantages, and they are also enjoying useful soft skills brought by multilingualism. They could solve problems better and have a stronger cognitive ability. According to Bialystok' (1997) experiment, bilingual children could understand more about the symbolic function of written language than monolingual children and the advantage exists for a long time. To improve children' abilities and competitiveness, parents expect their children to acquire a second or a third language from early childhood.

Another reason for learning English is Chinese educational policy. The only pathway to enter domestic university in China is passing the National University Entrance Qualify Exam, and English is an important component of this high-stakes exam (Ríos & Castellón, 2018). If Chinese students want to enter a domestic university, they have to achieve academic success (including English) in university entrance exam; if students want to study abroad, they need to reach language requirement for foreign university. As a consequence, it is necessary for us to learn English as a second language. Also, due to the trend of globalization, English is been considered as a worldwide language (Blommaert, 2010), so it is necessary to equip the next generation with English knowledge. From my personal perspectives, the language agencies are becoming more and more common. Although I didn't have the opportunity to learn English earlier, my parents insist sending my little brother to learn English when he was 5 years old because they think it is beneficial for his development. As a consequence, many Chinese children learn English from a very young age.

### **3. Age and language acquisition**

Some people insist age matters when it comes to language acquisition. Learning a second language has a critical period, which means children learn a language much easier than adults (Hartshorne, Tenenbaum, & Pinker, 2018). Language acquisition requires longtime time and energy input, and Hartshorne, Tenenbaum, and Pinker (2018) argue that individuals' grammar-learning ability is relatively strong throughout whole childhood (until 17.4 years old) and then decline significantly in the late adolescence. In second language learning, the ability of language acquisition declines gradual so younger children have AGE advantage over adults (Johnson & Newport, 1989). Throughout the entire L2 reading process, the age of learning L2 has an important influence on its' outcomes (Dirix & Duyck, 2017). From parents' perspective, they want their children to acquire a second language successfully, so they send their children to start learning a second language from early childhood and keep learning for many years. Age influences language acquisition so the new born generation is the younger language learners.

Learning second language also improve children communication skills. There is some evidence showing that when early children are exposed to multiple languages, their communication skills can enhance (Lieberman, Woodward, Keysar, & Kinzler, 2016). Compared with infants who are not exposed to a multilingual environment, infants with multilingual exposure could stand from a speaker's visual perspective to understand the request (Lieberman, Woodward, Keysar, & Kinzler, 2016). It means that the early multilingual exposure influences infants' understanding from others. To help children build up communication skills, parents try to create a multilingual environment for their children from a very young age.

Personally, I felt unconfident when I found my classmates had learnt English before, but I didn't. I admitted that I lagged behind at the beginning years in English class. From parents' perspectives, they expect their children to learn English before attending formal school because they don't want their children to lag behind in traditional education (Bolton, 2010). There are huge needs for early English learning in China (Bolton, 2010). To meet parents' demands, many private English sectors grow very fast and they have become chains of language schools. Those organizations proclaim that they could provide children (from kindergarten to university) with language tutorial but the qualities of their language programs are under debate (Bolton, 2010). Children are sent to those schools before primary school and it has become an educational tradition among Chinese.

#### **4. Critical issues about early bilingual literacy**

##### **3.1 The loss of mother language**

To advocate a better understanding of English, Chinese students who attend language schools are expected to speak English both at home as well as school and teachers in public school are asked to teach English in English (Bolton, 2010). There is a common belief that more exposure to the second language environment is good for second language learning outcomes. English instructions could maximum English exposure for students, so many parents hold 'time on task principle' (Zheng et al., 2006). They want English teachers speak English only and they ask their child to keep practicing English outside classrooms. They also believe the 'maximum exposure principle', which means the more time children spend on learning, the better outcome they will have (Hu, 2008). Those misbelieves about language acquisition leads to Chinese-free English class and too early second language learning. When I studied in public schools, my English class was Chinese-free, and everyone was encouraged to speak English to parents although my parents don't know anything about English.

However, in the early years of childhood, children' mother languages are fragile and easily lost. Cummins (2001) argue that many parents send their children to school for mastering a foreign language so early that their children spend longer time to catch up with teaching speakers' language lesson as well as home language conversation. The underdeveloped two language systems make early children feel confused and it is hard for them to digest both languages. The loss of first language identity happens when children' first language hasn't built up a solid foundation, but they are exposed to a second language environment (Cummins, 2001). The loss of first language is different from one to the other. Outside school, when the mother tongue is frequently used in families or communities, children will experience less first language loss. However, when children' parents, neighbors and friends don't talk with children in their first language, children will lose their first language skills within 2 to 3 years (Cummins, 2001). Before age 12, children whose first language usage is limited often experience cognitive slowdown (Thomas & Collier, 2011). Those children still have understanding first language abilities, but they will use the other language they learn to respond to others. As time goes by, those students are less likely to speak fluent mother language and they would lose the identity of their first language after they are exposed to a second language environment for a long time. After they grow up, there are an obvious linguistic gap between parents and children and some children feel isolated from both home culture and learned culture because of the first language loss (Cummins, 2001). My teachers asked me to speak English with my parents and I still remembered my parents' embarrassed reflection. I don't think talk with my monolingual parents in English is beneficial for my language development. Constant early second language exposure and limited mother language environment are responsible for their unsuccessful bilingual experience.

##### **3.2 First language and second language conflicts**

Regarding mechanisms, children of different age have different cognitive resources for learning languages, and it doesn't mean 'the younger the better' to acquire a second language (Blom & Paradis, 2016). Children who are exposed to the second language later are predicted higher multilingual literacy accuracy when the exposure is constant and effective. In terms of vocabulary and morphosyntax performance, children who learn the second language from an older age don't perform worse than

other, but the age effects influence their verb placement patterns (Blom & Paradis, 2016). For me for example, I didn't learn English very early, but I could speak English well at present. It is worthwhile to mention that early exposure to English is founded to be connected with lower mother language performance (Blom & Paradis, 2016). Before building up one language' foundation, it is too early to introduce another language system to children. The price of early children learning a second language too often is the loss of first language and cultural identity (Ríos & Castellón, 2018). The same situation happens in my little brother. There was a time he learnt a vocabulary 'pizza' at the school, but he didn't know how to write 'pizza' in Chinese. In his Chinese diary, he wrote a story about his weekend and 'pizza'. The two language systems confused him, and he couldn't use them properly.

The importance of mother language is emphasized by many educators. Ríos and Castellón (2018) argue that to become a truly bilingual, children have to keep developing the knowledge of their mother tongue. There are strong connections between mother language and second language development. First of all, the literacy level of the first language is a strong indicator of second language learning outcomes. The first language is a valuable resource for English learners. Students who have built up a solid first language foundation could have stronger second language learning abilities (Cummins, 2001). Before going to school, some students are facilitated with advanced first language skills. Their first language system could transfer across languages and have a positive influence on the foreign language system that they learn from school. Cummins (2001) argue that the two languages are interdependent. The concepts and literacy from the first language can transfer to the other language learning. Bilingualism confers linguistic advantages both on the first and second language learning. If students perform well in Chinese (as the first language), they are more likely to develop second language abilities well because of bilingualism advantages. As Krashen (2005) argue, readiness in the first language is providing great help for improving second language literacy. When students couldn't read free in the heritage language, they face more challenges when reading the second language. If students learn the first language explanation of targeted second language earlier, they could read targeted second language faster (Dirix & Duyck, 2017). It could interpret my classmates who learn English well also master Chinese well. In China, most local students choose public schools and there is limited students' variation among language backgrounds. They all have some knowledge about their first language (Chinese). After having English class, parents and teacher want them to become bilingual and bi-literate. Instead of losing the mother language, they are expected to learn the second language as well as first language. If second language learning process is suppressed and the first language is prohibited, children may in danger of losing both mother language and the second language (Ríos & Castellón, 2018).

### **3.3 Language education under suspicious**

Dual language education is under suspicious of many parents. Compared with Chinese instructions, parents prefer more exposure to English instructions because they believe the more exposure to the second language environment the better study outcomes children will have. (Zhang et al., 2006). There is some evidence from Paradis and Jia (2016) showing that students who are exposed to a richer second language environment and use the second language more at home are predicted to have stronger second language abilities and perform more like monolingual individuals. The time spending on one language is positively related to this language performance. English learners who practice English frequently is more likely to have better English performance because the use of a second language is associated with language outcomes.

Nowadays, Chinese bilingual programs have some instructions in Chinese and some instructions in English. Parents may worry about the limited time of giving the second language instructions and practices because their children are sent to learn a foreign language instead of their mother language. However, scientific findings show that well-implemented bilingual programs can promote the subject language and have little negative influence on first language system (Cummins, 2001). In Europe, the Foyer program is implemented in two or three languages to develop students' speaking and literacy abilities and it is a successfully bilingual and trilingual education example (Cummins, 2000). The parents may not realize the negative sides of the monolingual language learning environment. The

truth is the teaching processed by the language that children are familiar with is of great help. Students could gain both first language and second language skills when teachers give instructions in two languages (Raikes, et al., 2019). Students' comprehension ability to the second language improves significantly in dual language instructions (Raikes, et al., 2019). According to Schwartz, Moin, and Leikin experiment (2012), students who are immersed in the second language later and learn the first language continually could perform better in lexical knowledge development. The age of second language acquisition is not connected directly with students' outcomes and some instructions of the first language are significantly and positively connected with the second language lexical knowledge.

## **5. Dual language program**

Dual-language programs are becoming more common. Some second language learning schools view students' second language as 'broken and in need of fixing' and they undermined the importance of students' first language (Thomas & Collier, 2003). Some dual language programs use two languages in the classroom for instructions and learning, and they create many opportunities for students to acquire foreign language as well as retention of mother language (Alanís & Rodríguez, 2008). English learners receive support in their first language while learning a second language from enriched and sustained forms of instructions (Thomas & Collier, 2003). The mother tongue knowledge gives students content knowledge and literacy skills and those resources help them to understand and read more comprehensible (Collier & Thomas, 2007). It is the mother language helps them make cross-language connections. For example, twenty years ago, most Chinese don't know what hamburger is because it is a western food and it was not accessible for them. To help students understand what hamburger is, teachers could describe hamburgers' details to students and help them understand this vocabulary. If they couldn't understand the Chinese explanation of hamburger, this word is only an abstract word for them, and they don't understand what it is. The importance of the first language is that it could help students to understand the second language.

English learners benefit from dual language program because they are provided with an atmosphere where they could learn a second language without sacrificing personal identities. Many experiments show that dual language learning is successful at improving primary and secondary students' academic performance and literacy abilities (Lindholm-Leary & Borsato, 2006; Lindholm-Leary & Genesee, 2010). Students' bilingual literacy have great progress and moreover, bilingual students (from the various socio-economic background and linguistic background) who attend dual language learning program often have better academic performance than peers (Lindholm-Leary & Genesee, 2010; Lindholm-Leary & Howard, 2008). They are equipped with inclusive, integrated and unifying education experiences by dual language program (Thomas & Collier, 2003). Those programs are usefully resources for them.

To initiate a successful dual language program, Alanís and Rodríguez (2008) argue that pedagogical equity, qualified bilingual teachers, active parent-home collaboration and knowledgeable leadership are positive contributors. First of all, successful dual programs use the curricular mainstream taught in the child' native instruction. Before understanding and acquiring the second language, students grasp cognitive academic language proficiency and learning methods from the native language (Cummins, 1996). It is helpful for them to understand the second language quickly. In an equal pedagogy, languages have equal status and teachers don't promote one language and prohibit another (Alanís & Rodríguez, 2008). It means first language and second language have the same status and students shouldn't feel guilty about speaking mother language. The use of the first language pedagogy also creates a strong environment for active learning because students are allowed to use their first language to acquire knowledge (Alanís & Rodríguez, 2008). Language instruction is integrated with curriculum and teachers need to make sure students are learning the content as well as academic language connected with content (Lindholm-Leary, 2012). It is more accessible and easier for language learning. Besides, effective bilingual teachers need to apply effective second acquisition strategies to ensure children' correct comprehension and understanding of languages. They need to create opportunities for oral production by using the targeted language (Lindholm-Leary, 2012). Their instructions are

important because instructions are vehicles for students first and second language literacy development (Alanís & Rodríguez, 2008). Parents involvement in a language immersion program is appreciated because it helps parents build up awareness of their children' bilingual education programs (Sheffer, 2003). When parents understand that the dual language program needs their cooperation and participation, they could get more involved in children literacy and numeracy program and give extra support. Apart from the former factors, principal support and knowledge about dual language program are vital for program sustainability (Alanís & Rodríguez, 2008). Dual language program could address many critical issues facing by second language learning. Students could have access to high-status knowledge and high-quality instructional interaction in the dual language program, and the exposure of the second language wouldn't impede the development of their first language. The use of bilingual books is also a strategy of fostering bilingual (Ernst-Slavit & Mulhern, 2003). Bilingual books use two languages to explain the same stories. Those bilingual resources meet students' needs and give students access to literature in both L1 and L2 (Ríos & Castellón, 2018). When students meet problems while reading literature in the second language, they could turn to first language vision for help.

Many challenges also are faced by dual language program. First of all, time allocation is many parents' concerns (Lindholm-Leary, 2012). They expect that more exposure to the second language will result in better English proficiency. However, according to Lindholm-Leary and Genesee (2010), more exposure to English instruction in school doesn't lead to higher levels of English proficiency. A scientific allocation of instruction time is vital for program success. Apart from this, although many pieces of researches show that DLP (Dual Language Program) students achieve higher academic outcomes over time, they may perform worse and make slower progress in the early years of learning (Lindholm-Leary & Genesee, 2010; Lindholm-Leary, 2012). It requires teachers and administrators' extended attention to make sure students' expected progress. If students' achievement in the second language is inaccessible at the beginning of DLP, then teachers could measure children' first language' literacy and use their first language skills to gauge overall language skills and signal need for interventions and modification for second language teaching (Lindholm-Leary, 2012). Students who attend dual language program needs more attention and patience from parents and teachers.

## 6. Conclusion

The second language acquisition is closely connected with first language development. I am convinced that age is not vital for a second language learning and early exposure to a second language environment can lead to the loss of the first language. The mother language free instructions are not beneficial for both the first and second language development. I think it is important to keep a balance between the mother tongue learning and the second language acquisition. The well-designed dual-language programs could help students master a second language without sacrifice their mother tongue.

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