

Learning to be Biliterate in English and Malay Using Dual Language Books

Mukhlis Abu Bakar and Elizabeth Pang

KEY IMPLICATIONS

1. If the reading of DLBs is to be developed and sustained, the range of DLBs available needs to be developed further especially texts that are of interest and cultural relevance to children.
2. The process of becoming biliterate would be facilitated if the purpose of the different strategies used in teaching English and Malay were made explicit.
3. Peer reading could provide a focus for collaboration between Malay Language (ML) and English Language (EL) teachers given that some children greatly enjoyed peer reading and made good use of the DLBs.

ABSTRACT

This study explores the value of a strategy that involves pre-school Malay children and their families doing shared reading in both Malay and English using dual language books (DLBs). Ten kindergarten children participated in reading sessions with their mothers at home and with their peers in school. Analysis of fieldnotes and interview data show evidence of the children's awareness of differences in morphology, phonology and spelling. The use of strategies across languages includes the use of code-switching, attempts at translation, referring to both languages when reading, building a bilingual vocabulary and using English to access Malay. A particular strength of DLBs is the way in which they can support the learning of reading in a child's weaker language.

INTRODUCTION

In the context of Singapore's official bilingual policy in education and based on local knowledge of school and literacy practices in Malay speaking families, the study has identified issues that act against the development of a strong bilingual and biliteracy proficiency among pupils in Singapore schools. English is the main language of instruction, in use for all subjects other than Mother Tongue (MT) teaching, and the amount of time devoted to such teaching is reduced as pupils progress to the higher levels. This leads to the perception that English has a much higher status than the MT, as it is the language in which success is primarily measured. A result of the above is the fact, noted by some families, that children's use of their MT has been observed to decline in favour of English. An additional issue identified is the fact that English and Malay are taught in effect as a form of double monolingualism, in watertight compartments, with no opportunity for bilingual learning, or reflection in class, on the relationship between the two languages.

This pilot study explores the value of a strategy that involves Malay kindergarten children and their parents doing shared reading in both Malay and English using DLBs. Research in the UK and elsewhere has shown that DLBs, used by a well-informed teacher, in close partnership with parents, play an important role in developing the children's academic literacy skills in two languages. Reading DLBs has resulted in improved metalinguistic awareness as children compare languages in terms of words and sentence structures (Sneddon, 2008). The opportunity to cross-transfer and code-switch, by moving back and forth between

languages, has enabled children to compare and contrast concepts across languages (Escamilla & Hopewell, 2010). Reading DLBs also create a space for them to explore their personal identities (Cummins, 2009; Ma, 2008). The question addressed by the present study is whether and how working bilingually might benefit Malay pre-school children reading DLBs with their mothers and peers in Singapore.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Ten children from four kindergartens were selected for (a) their reported literacy in at least one language, and (b) their interest in storybooks. They were chosen from among those in the last year of kindergarten (aged 6). This sample includes children with varying levels of exposure to Malay and language dominance, and different levels of reading competence in both languages as well as economic circumstances. English is the medium of instruction in the kindergarten except during Malay language lessons.

More than half of the 11 DLBs used as reading materials for the children and their mothers were specially developed for the study and comprise stories with a Malay cultural focus. They are of the full-text translation type where two languages appear on the same page.

The study is essentially qualitative in methodology. Three parent-child observations at home and two peer reading observations in school were conducted. A deeper study was carried out with four of the children, with two additional home observations. Interviews with the parents and children were held before the commencement of the observations, after the observations were completed and at the end of each observation session. As this study aims to explore strategies used naturally by children and parents, no specific guidance was offered on the use of DLBs.

Data was collected via ethnographic field notes and digital video and audio recording. The reading sessions and interviews were transcribed, utterances coded and examples selected for inclusion in the study under the following categories:

Strategies: How children and adults use strategies from Malay or English to negotiate the reading task.

Translation: How children deal with the challenges of translation, particularly when words and phrases do not have identical meanings in each language.

Metalinguistic skills: How children comment on differences in linguistic structure.

Cultural understanding: How children draw upon shared cultural experiences and negotiate understanding of less familiar cultural references.

Identities: How children see themselves as bilingual learners, and how children relate to their peers, their parents and to each other as they negotiate the reading task.

KEY FINDINGS

The present study has yielded several important findings:

1. Strategies used by children who are learning to read using dual language texts

The strategies in evidence were very varied. Children approached the books in different ways: some chose to read the whole story in one language first before reading in the other language, some read both languages on the same page. The better readers made use of the context of the narratives, relating the stories to their personal experience, using clues from illustrations, and checking the text for translation. Others used logographic recognition, phoneme blending and sub-lexical analysis. There was substantial variation in the extent to which children engaged with the meaning of the texts as they read.

There is evidence from the research data that some children (including the slower readers) greatly enjoyed the peer reading and made good use of the DLBs in the sessions observed in school.

2. Strategies used by parents working with children using dual language text

The amount of reading input from parents varied considerably and support strategies ranged from merely listening to children decoding to engaging children with the meaning of the story, asking and answering questions, discussing features of the story, using actions, drama, a teddy bear, and relating the story to the children's own experiences.

Many were observed to use 'bilingual practices' in conversing with their children for understanding of text, such as code-switching and translation. For instance,

parents may initiate a conversation in a language different from the language of the text being read, or code-switch between the two languages. Parents may also ask for the translation of a word from the child.

3. Nature of transfer of strategies, concepts and skills between languages

The use of strategies across languages includes the use of code-switching, attempts at translation, referring to both languages when reading, building a bilingual vocabulary, and using English, colloquial Malay, passive knowledge of Malay, as well as funds of knowledge to access Malay words.

There is evidence that some children who spoke colloquial Malay were encountering the standard language through the DLBs. One feature of the data is the way in which readers substituted Johor-Riau pronunciation¹ (JR) for the school-approved Sebutan Baku pronunciation (SB), thereby clearly indicating that they were reading with understanding.

Sub-lexical analysis seemed appropriate given the transparency of Malay orthography, while whole-word recognition is more appropriate for English. However there is evidence that some transfer strategies used by some children were unhelpful, such as applying sub-lexical analysis to reading in English, leading to confusion with phonology.

4. Metalinguistic understanding/comprehension of reading simultaneously in two languages

There is evidence in the data of children's awareness of differences in syntax, morphology, phonology and spelling between the two languages, ranging from simple to highly complex structures, and how each language is similar and different.

There is also some evidence of children being confused by differences in word order between the two languages. However, this often turned into a valuable learning experience when the attending parent engaged with the child.

5. Children's evolving personal and learner identities

There is evidence from the school-based sessions that a number of children benefitted from working with their peers and enjoyed the process. Observations and interview data from parents, teachers and the children suggest that four of the children benefitted most from the project, in terms of increased interest and competence in speaking and/or reading in Malay.

Two children were already able to read, speak and understand in both languages and thus had less need for dual language text which was conceived of as a scaffolding to help children access the less familiar language. For these children, the DLBs were savoured for their stories and provided the stimulation for engaging in bilingual learning with their parents and peers.

The remaining four children demonstrated how the DLBs had moderate to little or no impact. This was due to factors such as little parental involvement, different notions of what parents count as reading, and ineffective parental strategies all of which reduce the value of any programme that encourages parents to read with their children.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY/ PRACTICE

For Policy

The project has led to the development of DLBs with a Malay cultural focus. A particular strength of DLBs is the way in which they can support emergent reading behaviour in a child's weaker language. While this may not always be Malay, given the differential amount of exposure to Malay and English in the curriculum, the teaching of Malay could be prioritised and the books introduced initially as a teaching aid to support reading in Malay.

There is also a need to develop further the range of books available. Given the children's differential language balance and the wide range of reading ability, quality texts need to be available from reading entry level to early

¹ JR pronunciation is traditionally associated with colloquial and standard Malay. This is still the case in Malaysia but only up till 1993 in Singapore when it severed JR pronunciation from standard Malay and adopted SB instead.

primary level. One strategy would be to ensure that more picture books produced for young children in Singapore are published in DLB format. While there is a place for the translation of popular children's literature from English, priority could be given to texts that are of cultural relevance to the children.

For practice

For bilingual education to be effective, a space needs to be created for dialogue between ML and EL teachers. Their teaching strategies are different, as are their teaching resources. This leaves it to children themselves to synthesize the teaching methodologies. While some are adept at transferring strategies from one language to another (e.g., phoneme blending, logographic recognition, use of illustrations), others may experience difficulties. The process of becoming biliterate would be facilitated if the purposes of the different strategies were made explicit and if strategy convergence could be agreed on where appropriate.

Peer reading encourages slower readers to read and is a strategy that could provide a focus for collaboration between ML and EL teachers. This would enable regular and casual reference to be made in the English language classroom to children's skills in Malay, raise the status of the MT and reinforce learning in what is generally the children's weaker language. The video data could be used in discussion with teachers and curriculum leaders with a view to setting up a classroom-based peer reading programme using DLBs.

SB artificially irons out the few divergent letter-sound correspondences in JR pronunciation making Malay orthography more transparent. However, it is not a natural, lived pronunciation. Teachers teaching standard Malay need to support, if not celebrate, students who are active users of Malay at home and who are used to JR pronunciation. One strategy is to focus on standard grammar and vocabulary with SB as scaffolding for teaching pronunciation, and allow for flexibility if students gravitate to JR pronunciation. The use of SB in the region is limited while JR is the standard pronunciation across Malaysia with links to the children's cultural roots.

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About the authors

MUKHLIS Abu Bakar is with the National Institute of Education, Singapore. Elizabeth Pang is Programme Director and Principal Specialist (Literacy Development) with the Ministry of Education, Singapore.

Contact Mukhlis at mukhlis.abubakar@nie.edu.sg for more information about the project.

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