

NEWSLETTER

MORE THAN ONE LANGUAGE EDITION



DEAR PARENTS/EDUCATORS/COLLEAGUES,

By Claire Hsieh (Bilingual Linguistic Therapist)

As our world becomes more culturally complex, the languages we communicate with become even more so. It is common for our clients to hail from diverse communities speaking a variety of languages. As educators, speech language pathologists and therapists, our interventions change as our clients' needs evolve. Is the child experiencing symptoms of a language disorder, or is he just acquiring a second language? Does learning another language cognitively confuse a child with special needs? What are the changes in our language interventions to suit the different needs of bilingual children? Should parents use different languages with their children in different situations? These are some of the questions we address in this newsletter.

TOTAL COMMUNICATION THERAPY'S PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT RETREAT

Our team of educational therapists and speech pathologists traveled to Kuching, Sarawak in August, for the 15th International Conference on Child and Adolescent Psychopathology. With the conference theme being "Enhancing resilience in children, young people and families in a changing world", an integrated global and multidisciplinary perspective was taken throughout the event. We had an amazing experience hearing from renowned academics,

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practitioners, researchers, and policymakers throughout the 3 days we were there.

From language interventions for children with special needs, to coping with mental health struggles among teenagers and strategies for parenting, the conference's topics of discussion were highly relevant and insightful for our clinicians. We learnt about the newest research findings and clinical interventions that can enable children with special needs to reach their highest potential via successful communication and smooth development. We've definitely gained new understandings that can aid our clinical practice back home.

LANGUAGE DIFFERENCES VS LANGUAGE DISORDERS

by Kerensa Chew (Speech-language Pathologist)



In Preschool Children: How Can We Tell the Difference? International Schools Edition

An essential part of a child's development is language development, especially in the diverse setting of Singapore's international schools.

Understanding the difference between language differences and disorders is crucial for parents and educators in today's environment, where children frequently speak languages other than English.

Language Differences:

- **Cultural and Linguistic Diversity:**

International schools in Singapore attract children from various linguistic backgrounds. Students often grow up speaking languages like Mandarin, French, Spanish, or others at home. These language differences are a natural part of their cultural upbringing and should be celebrated.

- **Code-Switching:**

This refers to fluidly switching between languages when speaking. This is a common and healthy expression of children's bilingual or multilingual abilities. It allows them to communicate effectively in different settings.

- **Grammar and Pronunciation Variations:**

Each language has its own grammar rules and pronunciation patterns. Children often exhibit variations in grammar or pronunciation based on the language they are speaking. This reflects their exposure to different linguistic structures.

- **Language Development Milestones:**

Languages have unique developmental milestones. Children learning English as a second language often take longer to reach certain language milestones in English compared to their English-speaking peers.



Language Disorders: :

- **Consistent Challenges:**

A language issue can be present if a child has consistent difficulties with language expression, comprehension, grammar, or pronunciation in all languages, including their native languages. Their ability to interact and communicate successfully with others may be impacted by these difficulties.

- **Difficulty Learning Multiple Languages:**

Some children often find it challenging to learn and use multiple languages. This can manifest as difficulties in acquiring vocabulary, forming sentences, or expressing thoughts in any language they are exposed to, including their first language.

- **Limited Vocabulary and Sentence Structure:**

Children with potential language disorders often have limited vocabulary range and struggle with building complex sentences. Expressing their thoughts and ideas clearly can be challenging for them, even in their first language.

- **Delayed Language Development Milestones:**

If a child consistently falls significantly behind their peers in achieving language milestones in their first language (e.g., first words, combining words), it is time to consider the possibility of a language disorder and seek appropriate intervention.

Empowering young minds to communicate successfully, and thrive academically and socially in the multicultural environment of international schools in Singapore is imperative for overall growth. Parents and educators can do this by respecting and encouraging linguistic variances while being more aware of potential language disorders.



THE BILINGUAL BRAIN

by Claire H. (Bilingual Linguistic Therapist)



What's the science behind it? Addressing parental concerns regarding second language acquisition for children with special needs.

As clinicians, we've received numerous concerns from parents regarding exposing their children to more than one language. Will the child become more confused? Will learning two languages delay their development in any way? In this article, I'll be explaining the benefits of bilingualism for both neurotypical and children with special needs, and address potential parental considerations.

In Singapore, 75% of the population are bilingual or multilingual (Jones, 2022), making the nation with one of the highest bilingualism rates in the world. It is common for households to speak their native languages at home, and English being used widely in public settings. As a result, the topic of bilingual language evaluation and intervention in education is pertinent to be discussed. Empirical evidence constantly shows that bilingualism has potential benefits for kids with special needs. There is no concrete evidence to suggest that children with developmental difficulties are unable to learn many languages. These children can pick up a second language while still maintaining their unique linguistic development (Novogrodsky & Meir, 2020).



Why can young children be encouraged to learn two or more languages?

Firstly, the local environment in Singapore promotes it. Secondly, and more crucially, young children's malleable minds are especially well-suited to learning a second language between the ages of 0 and 3. Lastly, numerous studies have demonstrated that bilingualism improves one's capacity for creativity, critical thought, and mental flexibility (Trautner, 2019).

For children with special needs such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Dyslexia, a growing body of research has shown that the benefits of bilingualism/multilingualism are profound. Studies point to a potential multilingual advantage in children with ASD, in terms of nonverbal IQ, adaptive functioning, expressive vocabulary, and improved executive function (Romero & Uddin, 2021). For bilingual children with dyslexia, they were found to have better phonological literacy skills in English than their monolingual English peers with dyslexia (Siegel, in press).

The benefits of bilingualism and multilingualism among children with special needs can be significant. I have seen some of my bilingual clients fluidly interchange between their native languages and English while communicating with me. They are also more cognitively flexible in terms of creativity and ability to problem-solve. The bilingual brain is very powerful! Of course, each child has their own unique situation and developmental needs; hence raising a bilingual/multilingual child needs to be handled with care. Just as there are potential benefits for bilingualism, some children with special needs or learning difficulties may not be most suited to learn another language if they are already significantly struggling in their native tongues.

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MATHEMATICS

By Ranjeetha Selvaraja (Educational Therapist)



Is this another language my child has to learn?

Mathematics has a long-standing reputation of being the subject that makes students (and parents) cringe. Some may see this as an intriguing puzzle to solve, while others see it as an overwhelming challenge. Here, we'll examine the question of mathematics as a language that our children must learn or there's more to it.

Mathematics, in a way, is the language of numbers. Whether counting objects or performing sophisticated calculations, numbers are the basis of all mathematical theories. Just as language allows us to speak our thoughts and ideas, numbers allow us a way to express our quantities in a rigorous and formal fashion.



One of the reasons why math can appear like a foreign language, is the abundant usage of symbols and notations. From + and - to vars and equations, these symbols depict mathematical operations and correlations. Though intimidating at first, understanding these symbols is similar to learning a new alphabet or script in a tongue.

Beyond just numbers and symbols, math develops rational thinking and problem-solving abilities. As with language, mathematics allows us to transmit and process information, while it teaches our minds to think logically and in a sequential manner. Students are taught to deconstruct larger problems and find ways to solve them by reasoning through them.

In contrast to the popular misconception that mathematics is an abstract discipline, it is closely intertwined in our daily lives. From budget to data analysis, mathematics plays an essential role in everyday real-life applications. Knowing mathematics provides individuals with the tools to make sound decisions, evaluate data, and negotiate the increasingly sophisticated challenges of modern life.

While math has some aspects that can be thought of as linguistic, it is more than just another language that our kids need to master. It's a tool for teaching critical thinking, problem solving, and logical reasoning. Math is a key which unlocks the door of several careers that helps us to understand and interact to what is around in the world. So, let's tell our kids to embrace the wonder and power of math, because it is definitely more than just a language.

INTERVENTIONS AND ASSESSMENTS

*By Prudence Low (Speech-language Pathologist)
Clinical Director*



Bilingual Assessment and Intervention at TCT (Chinese and English)

The topic of language disorder versus language differences is one that has always been of interest to speech language pathologists. Studies have shown that the condition of developmental language disorder (estimated to be between 7% to 11% of population) could potentially affect a

student's academic, social, and ultimately, quality of life. This condition, if identified and appropriately and adequately treated early on in life could potentially be ameliorated to good extent.

The situation becomes a little more complex for language therapists when students from a non-English speaking background enters into an English-medium school or an international school that requires mastery of the English language in order to be successfully accessing the curriculum. Students who have traditionally "slipped through the cracks" in a school of their home country, in that there is already an underlying language disorder issue that was not previously detected, could potentially continue in disadvantageous position. There is a likelihood that they would also be struggling with the English language if they are already struggling in the Chinese language.



Gathering Information is Key

Gathering information about the student's learning history is key. This is paramount, and necessary, when the child transitions from a school of a different country to a school here in Singapore. This can mean going beyond school report cards to ask certain important developmental- based questions.

Sensitivity to Poor Progress in EL2

Once the student is placed in an international school and is receiving EL2 remediation (i.e. English as a Second Language learning class), it is important that progress be monitored constantly. Many factors can obscure a language disorder, such as, when too many students with diverse language backgrounds are being placed together, the school's own criteria of what would be acceptable to go in grade, a lack of standardized periodical testing for bilingual or multilingual students etc. In such a situation, the SLP would have to use her discretion, of whether assessing in a dynamic way – i.e test, and then teach and re-test – to see if the student easily retains the information (has propensity to generalise language skills), or using specific tests such as “Recalling Sentences” would lend more clues towards the extent of gap that needs to be bridged.

Parental Understanding – Language issue not an “Intelligence” Issue

Parents from a culturally different background may not have earlier access to information such as a language disorder and may be less willing to seek help.



Singapore School Context

In Singapore, within the Singapore school system, students may be identified earlier – having symptoms of late emergence of speech and language in their home language. They may also be only identified during the students' school aged years – starting in primary school if they are fortunate enough.

Assessments in the English language could be meted out, to obtain a baseline of functioning level. The English assessments are often normed with the UK, Australian or US population, and the findings interpreted against the backdrop of the Singapore context, relying on the experiences of the speech language pathologists or therapists to obtain meaningful results.

The assessment findings allow the clinicians to understand the following:

- Which areas of language requires remediation; the areas could be vocabulary, syntax, higher order language skills, listening comprehension, making inferences, following instructions, written expressions etc.
- The baseline, by which progress in the following year could be tracked;
- How far would a gap be for a student as compared to his peers, which is important when it comes to making decisions about school suitability, school placements, grade placements etc.

There is a lot of value that could come out of assessing a student from a bilingual or multilingual background when student is making less than optimum progress in school. The route by which we go about the assessment may be different and could take a little time, but it would save the family and student a lot of heartache and headache overall.



EDUCATIONAL THERAPY FOR BILINGUAL CLIENTS

by Darren Low (Educational Therapist)



In some of our daily practice, we see bilingual children and their parents finding ways to manage two or more languages due to their complexities.

It is crucial to provide our expertise to assist them to navigate their way in areas such as writing narratives, problem solving, reading comprehensions etc.

At Total Communication, we understand the importance of bilingual language evaluations for children. Hence, we offer solution-focused therapy designed to support bilingual children and their families. The goal of solution-focused therapy is not just to improve academic performance but to also empower individuals to become independent and self-regulated learners.

Solution-focused therapy for bilinguals:

For those who are unfamiliar with solution-focused therapy, it is a form of goal-orientation therapy that helps individuals divert their attention away from the problems and to find ways and means to focus only on solutions. This encourages clients to pay more emphasis in identifying the crux of an ongoing issue and reducing its recurrence significantly.

- **Cultural Integration:** Students who are bilingual and experiencing an identity or cultural crisis may benefit from solution-focused counseling, which can help them explore in-depth the connections between their language proficiency and cultural background. This will aid in fostering a sense of identity and community.
- **Language Development:** Bilingual students with DLD may occasionally struggle to express themselves in one or both of their languages when it comes to language development. By

emphasizing the student's strengths, the therapist will utilize the language the student is most comfortable with through solution-focused treatment. With this method, the therapist and the student can both adjust to the language and communication style that best suits their preferences and skills.

- **Breaking down issues:** One important aspect of solution-focused therapy is how it can help students breakdown difficult and important issues. This is accomplished by focusing on goals, emphasizing solutions, scalability of questions, and training students to tackle problems in smaller steps. By doing so, it helps students break down issues in an effective manner, builds on their strengths and work towards achieving their personal goals.
- **Encouraging sense of agency:** With solution-focus, it helps foster a belief that clients have the power to create positive changes in their lives. The approach to this is to make them realize that they themselves possess the ability to shape their own lives, which will in turn boost their confidence and sense of agency.
- **Academic Challenges:** Students that are bilingual may also experience academic difficulties due to cultural variations in learning approaches. With the use of solution-focused therapy, students can concentrate on enhancing their resilience and coping mechanisms to get beyond these common challenges.

In all, solution-focused therapy is a great tool that can be used to help individuals navigate their way around complex language and cultural differences in a positive and constructive manner.



COME DOWN, 下来!

by Tan Rae'anne (Developmental Therapist)



Disciplining bilingual/multilingual children; does the choice of language matter?

Most Singaporean children are raised to be, or at least expected to be raised bilingual. Yet, parents in Singapore do report significant stress in their bid to raise bilingual children. Parenting is no easy feat, and the methods of discipline used in the process might be familiar to some – shouting, yelling, harsh words, threats, spankings. Henceforth we wonder, in a bilingual society like Singapore, what might be some effects of the language of discipline a parent chooses?

Firstly, the language of discipline carries emotional weight.

Conscious Discipline supports first teaching adults to be conscious about self-control and self-regulation to be better role models for children. It is founded upon brain-state research and posits that effective discipline for a child stem from connection, which leads to a sense of safety and henceforth willingness.

Effective bilinguals tend to speak in their native language in the face of strong emotions such as anger and frustration. Children spontaneously associate each language with a distinct emotional context and use that to determine “how is mummy feeling?”. When a child hears mummy’s calm disciplining language, they are also supported to stay calm and learn the boundaries and behaviours taught.

From a linguistic perspective, language associations are created.

When a single language is used for discipline, children learn to associate it as the more assertive and disciplinary language and that “mom only means business when she speaks in (a particular language)”.

It has been shown that an effective way to promote bilingualism is by cultivating positivity around both languages. Using a single language in discipline might result in negativity and tension surrounding the language, associating it with negative emotions, creating resistance against it.

But at the end of the day, the language of discipline also facilitates an organic environment for language learning.

One of the most important, yet hardest things to do in raising bilingual children is maintaining consistency. Studies have shown that children who see the language as personally relevant are more highly motivated to learn the language than a child whose language exposure is limited to the classroom. When a child is disciplined consciously in a loving and safe connection with the adult, the language of discipline also becomes the language of nurturance, creating the most organic environment for language learning.

Parenting is no easy feat, let alone bilingual parenting! Children’s social-emotional or language development is at the core of what we do. Should you have any queries or concerns, feel free to contact us at Total Communication!

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THERAPIST FEATURE:



Interview of Rae'anne Tan, Developmental Therapist by Claire H.

In line with our newsletter theme, “More Than One Language”, our newest addition to the team is Rae'anne. She is Total Communication Therapy's Developmental Therapist, delivering services to children via play, music and movement-based therapy. She shares with Claire, the bilingual linguistic therapist, her experience working with bilingual children and families.

Claire: Do you have clients who speak more than one language? What are your therapy sessions with them like?

Rae'anne: I currently have two clients who are effectively bilingual. One of them speaks Chinese and English, while the other speaks English and Korean. Both seamlessly switch between languages within a single sentence. For example, my Chinese client is learning to expand his communicative intent, and he will say, "I want to blow bubbles, yao (要)". The Korean client switches between languages depending on context. When conversing with his mother, he will

seamlessly integrate both languages by mixing phrases such as "oma, open, chuseyeo..." and "an dui, open".

In a typical bilingual session, I encourage natural language use by code-switching between languages. I will also engage in activities where we play games in both languages so that my clients are exposed to both.

Claire: I've noticed that some parents are concerned about letting their children, who have special needs, learn another language besides English. What are your thoughts on this?

Rae'anne: There's no harm in exposing and teaching children with special needs another language. In fact, there are numerous benefits. The language command of children with special needs falls behind their neurotypical peers. However, effectively bilingual children with special needs have a much more natural progression of language as compared to neurotypical kids who are monolingual. When we compare the former to the latter, we see that second language acquisition among neurotypical children is more rigid, static and less flexible in terms of usage.

Would I recommend bilingualism or multilingualism to parents?

I would say it depends on case by case, but I would like to reiterate that learning another language for special needs children is beneficial for their development. As special needs children may take a bit longer to develop and require extra effort for dynamic learning, being effectively bilingual for them can accelerate their dynamic thinking and cognitive flexibility.

Furthermore, since special needs children may struggle with implicit learning, providing them with a bilingual environment and prolonged exposure to more than one language can help them develop implicit learning naturally.

However, we need to be cautious in making sure

that this is looked at on a case-by-case basis. There are two factors to consider: firstly, whether the child has difficulties learning native language due to speech language impairment; secondly, whether the child is learning the extra language at a functional level or an academic level. If the child needs the second language to get by daily since the environment calls for it, then I would say exposure and acquiring at the functional level may be needed. If the child has speech language impairment, I will not recommend them to learn another language at the academic level, especially when they already have English as an academic subject, and other subjects to deal with in school.

Claire: What do you think are the factors parents can consider when deciding on whether to expose their child to another language, or take away a language for their child's development?

Rae'anne: First is consistency, where exposure to the second language is consistent across environments. Furthermore, try not to attach too heavy emotional connotations to a single language when it comes to disciplining children. Secondly, ensure both speech, visual and auditory materials such as television, radio, books, are available in both languages. Thirdly, ensure sufficient parent competency in the language that the child is acquiring.

Most importantly, parents need to be clear on what they ultimately want for their children.

Do they want their child to focus on only one language or be bilingual/multilingual? Weighing the advantages and disadvantages is crucial.

Claire: What can parents do at home to provide a natural bilingual environment for their children with special needs?

Rae'anne: One essential tip is not to "force" your child to learn the second language. For example, try not to designate specific times to speak only one language as this approach can be a significant deterrent for your child. Instead, maintain the flow of your conversations and actions as naturally as possible by switching across languages.

For instance, instead of saying "I am cooking noodles. Noodles is 'mian' (面)", try "I am cooking 面". If your child responds in English, that's okay. The key is to keep it organic and unforced.

Claire: Thank you Rae'anne for such an informative conversation. In line with the theme of this issue, we would like to reinforce the misconception that learning another language can hinder a child's development. While there sure are cases where we do not encourage a child to be exposed to another language, that depends on any speech language impairments the child has and whether he intends to acquire the second language at an academic level. Otherwise, the cognitive benefits and developmental progress in learning are notably faster for children who are effectively bilingual. They tend to engage in more dynamic play and problem-solving activities compared to their monolingual counterparts.



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