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Speaking in Tongues

The benefits of raising bilingual children



AS A BILINGUIST, I often get asked: “How did you learn English so well?”, “When did you start learning English?” and “Did you live in America at some point in your life?” I giggle and think to myself, “Here we go again.” So, over the years of being asked these questions, my standard answer became, “The curriculum in the Philippines was adapted from the Americans and that’s one of many things (like Spam and Starbucks) that they left us after the war.”

I attended two private schools in Manila that taught major and minor subjects in English. Most state and private schools offer this curriculum as well. I would then continue to explain that my family speaks Filipino at home (also known as *Tagalog*). To those of you who have visited the Philippines, you will have instantly witnessed that bilingualism has become embedded in our culture, the media and our everyday lives over many decades. I would proudly say that I am only one out of millions of bilingual Filipinos.

Since the beginning of my teaching experience within the international-school education, I have taught bilingual children who have either bilingual parents or parents who aim to have bilingual families. In February 2014, Dr. Peeter Mehisto’s presentation of *Bilingual Education* in Ho Chi Minh City shed light on my understanding of bi-

lingualism. Through personal accounts and notes, I have composed quick FAQs that will hopefully answer some questions from concerned parents.

What are the benefits of bilingualism? According to Dr. Mehisto, author of *Excellence in Bilingual Education*, bilingualism has several cognitive benefits, especially when it begins at an early age. One of them is that bilingual learning can strongly affect the brain, particularly in the corpus callosum. He adds that bilingual education enhances thought-process control, boosting focus and problem-solving skills. Dr. Mehisto speaks about the flexible mind having more pathways of understanding, which allows it to see embedded images. He further explains that bilingual learning develops interpersonal communication, and it has greater potential to communicate creatively and socialize. Bilingual individuals are adaptable social beings who can see the world from different cultural perspectives, as they tend to have more avenues of thought.

Can a dual-language environment cause language delay? While many parents fear that their children will experience language delay when learning two languages at an early age, current research indicates that bilingual and monolingual children develop their speech at the same rate.

What can we do about language confusion? Experts recommend the ‘one-parent one-language’ method, considering the community to be a language educator as well. In my second year of teaching, I had a student with a German mother and an Italian father. From the beginning of her language development, both parents decided to use this method effectively and consistently. Her mother speaks to her in her first language, and the father does the same. She then develops English language at school and in the community. Many researchers have published models like this one that inform parents what language to speak and the exposure their children need based on their language preferences. Dr. Mehisto explains that code-switching is highly successful in bilingual learners, as they are able to interpret one language into the other simultaneously.

We would like our children to speak more in our first language, but since learning English at school, they speak more in their second language than their first. This is perfectly normal and nothing to worry about. Being in school most days of the week, children will naturally develop more vocabulary and social skills in their second language. To strike a balance between two languages, parents may need to find more opportunities for their children to be exposed to their first language. The quantity of exposure may vary in different communities, but there are various ways to provide it. Parents may consider exposing their children to films, books, songs or afterschool clubs, as well as socializing with other families who speak their first language.

As modern society creates a high demand for bilingualism, families are strongly encouraged to discuss their language preferences openly. In Vietnam, there are a few schools that offer a bilingual education, and the abundance of language schools is evident. Creating a diverse culture requires an entire nation, and it begins in the core of family values, branching out through language and communication. From what I have experienced so far, Vietnam is well on the way to developing the main resources of the country—a rich education and its multicultural people. ■