

**SOH KAY CHENG**

**The 5M Route to Bilingualism**

How is it that some people can learn a second or foreign language so easily and so well while others, given what seem to be the same opportunities to learn, find it almost impossible?

This question was asked by two eminent Canadian researchers of bilingualism, R. C. Gardner and W. E. Lambert, some twenty years ago. One wonders if it has been satisfactorily answered. Nonetheless, thirty years of empirical research in a large variety of language environments point out some common observations which can serve as a guide to the effective development of bilingualism in children. These can be summed up by the 5Ms.

**M1: Motivation** Learning a language is just like learning any other skill; it needs motivation. A language learner needs to know that after he has learned a language item, be it a simple word or a complex sentence, he will be rewarded. The reward may be material in nature when a child learns to ask for drinks, food, toys, or just some kind of assistance; he gets what he needs through language.

Here, language is instrumental in making his life more pleasant and enjoyable. At other times, the reward may be psychological, such as when a child has learned to recite a nursery rhyme and is praised or given a hug. Language, here, is also instrumental in bringing about psychological gratification. Language learning of this kind takes place all the time in the natural social environment - using language to get something beyond the language itself. This is the instrumental motive for learning a language.

However, children may find learning a language an intrinsically interesting activity, finding satisfaction in learning it and not caring for other kind of rewards. This is very much like playing a game of chess or trying to put together a jigsaw puzzle. The fun is in the doing and nothing else is expected. Since language and its culture are closely related, language will be incidentally learned with little conscious effort by participating in cultural activities. On the other hand, having learned a language to some degree of proficiency, one may want to delve into its culture. Such learning does not seem to lead to any extrinsic rewards and one learns the language for its own sake. This is the integrative motive for learning a language.

When a person can get the material or psychological gratification through the use of one language, will he feel the need to learn another language? Unlikely. It will not be easy to make him want to learn it since he can get by with one language. Of course, this is not the same as saying that he does not have the ability to learn more than one language; he simply finds it unnecessary.

This brings out one obvious point: let the child learn some language and reward him, with tangibles or praise, so that learning the language becomes instrumental to his physiological or psychological needs. However, over doing this will have a adverse effect in the long run. Experiments show that children who are rewarded for what they enjoy doing became uninterested in the activity itself and gradually became interested in the rewards. This motivational shift suggests that extrinsic or instrumental motivation works up to a point only and should not be given undue emphasis.

When children are interested in cultural activities, through watching or participation, they immerse in the cultural milieu and will acquire the language in an emotionally relaxed atmosphere - in short, they simply pick up the language. Moreover, learning a language this way makes the language part of one's daily, normal life. In contrast to the contrived learning situation of a classroom, this does not involve pressure external to the learner and may inculcate a positive attitude towards the language.

**M2: Models** Models are essential for language learners. Without such models, there will be no input to the learner's mind. Having heard a meaningful and comprehensible input, the child may imitate and use it to meet his needs; or, he may 'process' such inputs and thus derive language rules for use when appropriate. Therefore, hearing comprehensible messages are important for effective learning and it is here where good language models are indispensable.

Modelling is not limited to language per se but also to attitudes. The parents' attitude towards a particular language influences the child's attitude towards and achievement in that language. As a Canadian study shows, whether the parents spoke French was not related to the child's achievement in learning French but parental attitude towards that language did. This suggests that if parents want their children to learn a language, one good way is to learn the language themselves, not so much for coaching the children but to give them a good model of language learner. Doing so sends the message to the children that the language is worth mastering and mastery of the language is valued by the parents. In a sense, this turns the language to be learnt a 'mother tongue' in reality.
There are three possible additional benefits: First, when parents serve as language models, the children will identify with the languages. Second, parents will understand better the difficulty in learning languages and therefore will not pressurize their children unduly. And, thirdly, when parents use two languages, this becomes a norm in the family and provides a natural environment for the child to become bilingual.

M3: Materials To help children become bilingual, there is a need to increase exposure to the languages. Who can help? Parents, teachers, people in the community, and artists in the mass media may all influence the process and outcome of becoming bilingual. However, these people who serve as language models are not constantly available and children may not want to purposely learn language all the time, too. Hence, there is a need to find some ways to increase the ready availability of these models. For this, modern technology is helpful.

There are many products of modern technology that will extend the influence beyond immediate personal contacts with language models in providing the needed comprehensible language input. Such things as audio tapes, video tapes, photocopy machines and, of course, personal computers are omnipresent and children may not want to purposely learn language all the time, too. Hence, there is a need to find some ways to increase the ready availability of these models. For this, modern technology is helpful.

Although it is not impossible to learn an oral language without reading, reading does help, especially in an idiographic language like Chinese. After all, we are born with two brains, with the left hemisphere specializing in processing sounds and the right one in shapes. Thus, the two brains will complement each other in language learning through processing both sounds (the oral language) and shapes (the written language). Moreover, a more advanced level of bilingualism should mean 'biliiteracy' - the ability not only to use two languages in their oral form but also to read (if not necessarily to write) in both languages.

Books have been held in high esteem in the Eastern culture as well as in the West. They are a source of pleasure to many people, children and adults alike. They are also an important source of knowledge. However, as far as becoming bilingual is concerned, books afford another important source of language input, although it gets into the mind of the child through a different neurological pathway.

While the physical quality of books may decide to some extent their attractiveness or the lack of it to the child, the proper choice in terms of the language level and content should not be neglected. Books with a language level at the child's serve the purpose of practice and consolidation. Books with a language level slightly higher than the child's is challenging and provide an impetus to read on and an opportunity to 'conquer'; this gives the child a chance to have a sense of achievement. As for the content, books related to the child's interests and leisure pursuits serve information, recreational and motivational purposes. Although different children have different interests, generally speaking, boys prefer the more 'macho' stories and girls the more 'sissy' ones. Of course, books for children need not always be stories, they can be factual. In fact, young avid readers will read almost anything, from mother's recipes to shopping guides to encyclopedias.

M4: Methods The most fundamental issue in educating the bilingual is whether the two languages should be kept apart without cross references or should one language be used to facilitate the learning of another. A related issue is whether children should learn two languages concurrently or should the learning of one language be postponed until a solid foundation has been built in another so that the later-learned language can be 'grafted' to the one mastered earlier.

The audiolingual and the cognitive code approaches are the archetypes of these two contrasting schools of thought, with a whole host of their variants. This seemingly simple question is in fact confounded by many other factors such as the age of the child, the language environment he is in, whether the teacher is monolingual or bilingual and, above, whether communicative competence or bilingual literacy is the main objective.

Within the context of these two broad approaches, many specific methods or techniques have been experimented on and advocated: Combining language and physical activities; restricting language learning activity to only listening for the first six months or so; exposing the learner to language input in a very well-furnished and comfortable room in a relaxed atmosphere, etc.

Notwithstanding these, no one seems to disagree that the most effective way of learning a language (at least, its oral aspect) is the mother tongue approach; when the mother speaks a language, the child learns it fast and naturally. This lends support to the audiolingual approach. Some eighty years ago, a couple of linguists experimented on their child by having the father spoke one language only to it and the mother in another language only. The child grew up effectively bilingual. In a sense, the child acquired two mother tongues in an environment in which each of the two languages had its own specific social and practical functions. Of course, what is viable in an experimental situation may or may not be feasible in the real world. However, there is a lesson to learn from this unusual case.
Researchers also noticed that keeping two languages apart from a bilingual child may not be possible, as the child is aware of the differences between languages and may insist on asking for the equivalents across languages. This metalinguistic awareness can be capitalized for effective learning of two languages. Helping the child to learn how to express the same ideas in two languages is consistent with the current thinking that languages have communality not only in form but also in a common knowledge base. In practical terms, this means that the child, to become bilingual, needs only to learn the medium (how to say it) and not necessary the message (what to say) all over again. This is where bilingual texts, dictionary, teachers, parents and friends will be helpful. Moreover, in a multilingual community, keeping two languages apart in one and the same mind of a bilingual is so unnatural and even impossible, unless one is prepared to shut oneself off from people who use languages other than one’s own.

M5: Monitoring When we drive, we watch out for where we are heading for. This is monitoring. Learning languages likewise need feedback for two reasons. First, the child needs emotional satisfaction that he is on the right track and to feel secure in his adventure into the world of bilingualism. Secondly, he needs the feedback for a cognitive reason so that he can gradually refine his languages by acquiring the correct language rules and becoming aware of the exceptions within each and the differences between the languages.

Feedback may come almost immediately and in a natural manner. A child who learns to say "Please, may I switch to Screen 12" (be this in English, Mandarin, Malay, or Tamil) will certainly get a feedback that his request is understood. The actual outcome may or may not be to his liking; but that is a different matter. Here, the feedback is immediate and natural. People learn their first-learned language almost entirely through this real-life interaction. Hence, the situational approach of language teaching provides not only immediate and natural feedback but also the meaningful context of the language being learned. However, such situational feedback may not always be available or convenient to give. Besides, not all language learning can be packed into a natural social environment. Ways and means need be found to help the child in getting the feedback.

Formal assessment provides the most systematic and rigorous feedback, but this can be psychologically threatening (not only to the child but to the parents as well!) especially when it is to be taken at a given time in a tense atmosphere. To reduce the tension, tests in formal assessment can be given as quizzes to be taken when the child feels he is ready and in a more relaxed environment at home or in the classroom; and, to further reduce the tension, some kind of self-checking and self-scoring mechanisms may be devised. This will not put the child under the spotlight and will transfer the responsibility of learning and assessment to the child himself. Self-motivation may thus be enhanced.

For the child to keep track of his progress, some form of cumulative records can be designed. For instance, a colourful chart of new words learned can be displayed in the child’s bedroom or the family’s study. His recent and the latest writings can be mounted, too. If such display is not convenient, build up the child’s portfolio for keeping samples of his works. This enables him to monitor his own progress and be proud of his achievement. There is no reason why both displays and portfolio cannot be used at the same time, one for recent achievement and the other for long-term progress.

Whether it is situational feedback, formal assessment, or individual record-keeping, the availability and visibility of feedback enables the child to know where he is heading and how much he has acquired. Such monitoring devices have a motivating effect. And, as the saying goes, nothing succeeds like success.

These ideas take us back to the question this article began with:

How is it that some people can learn a second or foreign language so easily and so well while others, given what seem to be the same opportunities to learn, find it almost impossible?

The question Gardner and Lambert asked looks only at the opportunities to learn. It does not consider the conditions necessary to develop bilingualism. Research of the past three decades or so shows that the 5M’s are the essential ingredients of developing bilingualism, much of which are within the capability of parents to provide.

When parents use two languages, this becomes a norm in the family and provides a natural environment for the child to become bilingual.

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