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THE BILINGUAL ABILITY

OF MALAY CHILDREN IN SINGAPORE IN ENGLISH AND THEIR MOTHER TONGUE

BY

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Introduction

The Malays which are the largest minority group in Singapore formed about 15% of the population while their language which has been the lingua-franca of the region was made the National Language of Singapore since 1959. The changing shift of the economic, social and political situations in the past two decades have advanced English as the most important language, widely used in the government, official, commercial and the religious and family domains.

English is the main language of instruction in schools, and as a subject it could either be studied at the first or second language level. The bilingual education policy of Singapore also made it necessary for every child to study their mother tongue or their ethnic languages also known as "second languages" in order to inculcate the cultural values and ethnic identities of the pupils.

To be a balanced bilingual who is equally effective in both languages is a difficult endeavour especially where the environmental factors favour one language against the other. In the case of the Malay children, their mother-tongue still features most importantly in their daily lives inspite of the increasing influence of English and western ideas concomitant with modernization. According to Kuo (1980), mothet-tongue retention among the Malays in Singapore is the highest among the three major ethnic groups even though the type of Malay referred to is usually the informal Malay where the domain of usage has been relegated mainly to the family, the neighbourhood, and the religious domain.

The changing scenario in Singapore in the last two decades had made it necessary for Malay children to acquire English which for most of them will only be studied after enrolment in schools.

The present study is part of a larger study conducted by the School of Arts and Language Studies, Institute of Education in late 1985-86 together baseline data on English langauge and second language proficiency of primary three pupils in Singapore. This paper tries to examine the bilingual ability of a section of the sample that is the Malay children on their Malay-English proficiency, how proficient in Malay are they and to what extent have they acquired the English language?

Specifically it is the pupils' proficiency in the language as measured by their performance on the listening, speaking, reading and writing tasks that is considered, not their academic performance in the English/Malay language examinations even though a certain overlapping in the nature and content of the tests will be present.

Sample Size

The total sample for this English-Malay study is 91, of which 49 (53.85%) are boys and 42 (46.15%) are girls. All of them were in primary three, aged 8-9 years, when the first language test was administered.

This study primarily focused on the Malay ethnic group but a sizeable number of non-Malay pupils (Indians, Chinese and Eurasians) are also included in the sample. The following table shows the breakdown of the sample in terms of race and sex.

Table I : Race and Sex of the Sample

Race (n = 91)	Sex			Percent
	M	F	MF	
Malay	35	30	65	71.43
Non-Malay	14	12	26	28.57

The Test Instruments

Two sets of similar instruments, one in English and the other in Malay, were used to test the language proficiency of the sample. Each set consists of the following components :

- Listening comprehension
- Dictation
- Sound discrimination
- Reading comprehension
- Composition
- Oral expression.

In addition the Raven's Standard Progressive Matrices were also administered. All the English Language (EL) tests were administered first; four months later the Malay Language (ML) proficiency tests were taken by the pupils. The written tests were conducted on a class or group basis while the oral test was administered in a one-to-one situation to randomly selected pupils (66 pupils took the ML oral test and 24 pupils the EL oral test). The maximum score for each component in each language is 100.

Pupils' Performance on the Two Language Tasks

Malay Language

In general the overall performance of the sample on the Malay Language proficiency test was high. The overall mean for a total of five components excluding oral expression was 391.91 with a standard deviation of 50.44. This can be attributed to the high performance in listening comprehension, dictation, sound discrimination and oral expression. Performance in reading comprehension and composition fell below the composite mean of all the components, which is 78.38.

English Language

The subjects' performance on the English Language proficiency test was not as high as that for Malay, with a mean of only 367.74. The means of components which stood above the overall mean were those for sound discrimination, listening comprehension and dictation. Performance in oral expression, composition and reading comprehension components fell below the overall mean. There was also greater spread in the pupils' performance in English (S D = 66.44) than in Malay (S D = 50.44).

Table 2 shows the mean of the total scores for the English and Malay tests, while Table 3 displays the results of all the components of the two sets of tests. A t-test was carried out to find out whether there was any difference in the subjects' performance in the overall English and Malay tests. The t-value obtained ($t = 2.64$, $p < 0.01$) showed that there was no significant difference in overall performance between the two languages, with performance in Malay higher than in English.

Table 2

Overall Performance in English and Malay

Language	Maximum	Mean	S D	t-value
English	500	367.74	66.44	
Malay	500	391.91	50.44	- 2.64 ($p < 0.01$)

Table 3

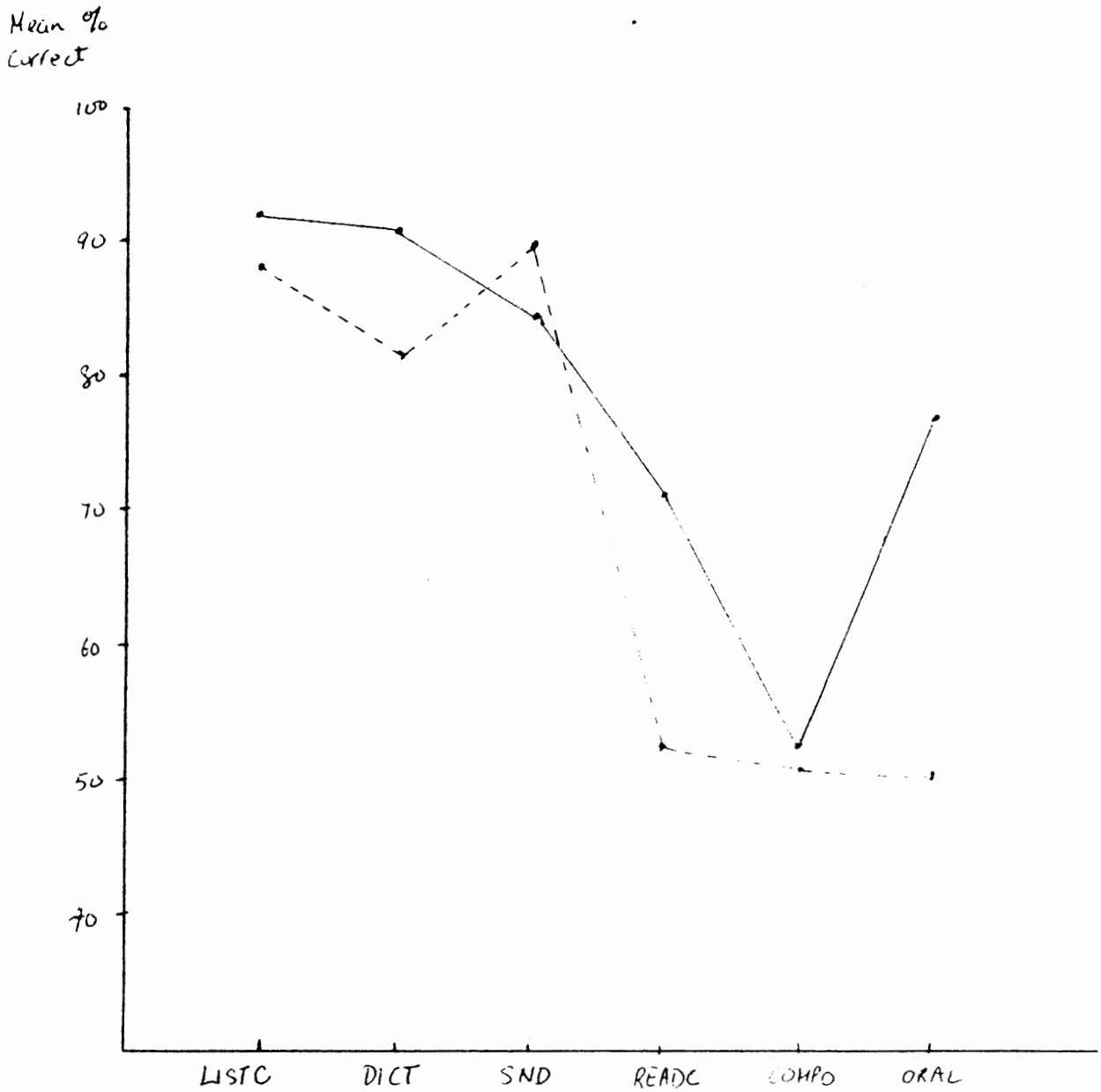
Bilingual (Malay-English) Ability

Component (n = 91)	Language	Mean	S D	t-value
Listening Comprehension	Malay English	91.10 88.35	16.96 15.86	1.13 ns
Dictation	Malay English	90.07 82.57	13.39 22.49	2.65 +
Sound Discrimination	Malay English	84.25 89.86	12.61 8.92	-3.24 ++
Reading Comprehension	Malay English	70.44 54.29	19.55 21.51	4.91 ++
Composition	Malay English	55.44 50.73	16.99 17.53	-1.46 ns
Oral	Malay English	77.27 50.65	16.67 10.62	5.59 ++

++ $p < 0.01$ +++ $p < 0.001$

Table 4

Overall Performance in Malay and English



Correlation between Overall Performance in English and Malay with its respective components

There was a very weak correlation between the overall performances in English and Malay ($r = 0.03$). But the correlations of the pupils' overall performances with its respective components within each language were very strong in all skills except in oral expression. For example, high overall performance was closely related to high performance in dictation and composition than in other skills. This is shown in Table 5.

Table 5

Correlation between Pupils' Overall Performance and Language Components Within English and Malay

Components	English	Malay
Listening Comprehension	0.785 ++	0.731 ++
Dictation	0.893 ++	0.820 ++
Sound Discrimination	0.414 ++	0.566 ++
Reading Comprehension	0.775 ++	0.606 ++
Composition	0.884 ++	0.557 ++
Oral Expression	0.152 ns	0.287 +

++ $p < 0.001$ + $p < 0.05$

Correlations between Language Components within Malay and English

Correlations between most of the components within each language area ranged from high to moderate (Refer to Tables 6 & 7). However, within English, all components were significantly correlated (See Table 6), indicating the close relationship between one language skill and another.

Similarly in the Malay language test, statistically significant correlations were obtained for most of the components except for reading comprehension with listening comprehension, sound discrimination with composition, sound discrimination with reading comprehension, and oral expression with reading comprehension, listening comprehension and sound discrimination.

Table 6

Correlation Matrix for English Language Components

	English Language Components	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Listening Comprehension	1.00					
2	Dictation	0.514 +++	1.00				
3	Sound Discrimination	0.304 ++	0.327 ++	1.00			
4	Reading Comprehension	0.542 +++	0.514 +++	0.207 +	1.00		
5	Composition	0.645 ++	0.813 ++	0.403 ++	0.586 ++	1.00	
6	Oral *	0.283	0.094	-0.519 ++	0.303	0.194	1.00

\+ $p < 0.05$ ++ $p < 0.01$ +++ $p < 0.001$

* There was a much smaller sample (n = 24) selected to take the oral component

Table 7

Correlation Matrix for Malay Language Components

	Malay Language Components	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Listening Comprehension	1.00					
2	Dictation	0.58 +++	1.00				
3	Sound Discrimination	0.45 +++	0.56 +++	1.00			
4	Reading Comprehension	0.13	0.31 ++	0.09	1.00		
5	Composition	0.27 ++	0.35 +++	-0.11	0.22 +	1.00	
6	* Oral	0.10	0.38 ++	-0.21	0.17	0.51 +++	1.00

+ $p < 0.05$ ++ $p < 0.01$ +++ $p < 0.001$

n = 66

Summary of the performance of this sample

The findings of the study point to the following features of Malay-English bilingual ability of a sample of our primary three children :

. The overall performance in Malay was slightly higher than that in English,

. Children performed significantly better in Malay than in English in all components, except composition and listening comprehension where the differences were not significant.

- Among the six components, children did much better in listening comprehension, dictation and sound discrimination than in reading comprehension and composition.

- Pupils' oral competence in Malay was much higher than that in English.

- Pupils' scores in composition (both EL and ML) were low compared to those in other skills. This showed that composition writing was the most difficult skill to master.

- There were no substantial correlations between the corresponding components in the two languages. This could point to the fact that in the context of bilingual language acquisition, pupils' performance in any one language was dictated more by the specificity of the language itself rather than by the basic skills required for the different language components.

- Within a single language most of the components were correlated.

- For the Malay language there was a marked clustering among the components which requires writing skill as against the other components.

- Within each language, listening-related skills such as listening comprehension and sound discrimination had the highest scores. This may be attributed to the fact that listening skills were of a lower level than writing and that the acquisition of listening skills came before writing.

Performance of Malay Pupils on the Bilingual Proficiency Test

A t-test was also carried out to find out whether there were any differences in performance scores between the Malay and non-Malay children on both the EL and ML tests. The overall results are recorded in Table 8.

Table 8

Difference in Performance Between Malay and Non-Malay Sample

Language	Ethnicity	n	Overall Mean	S.D.	t-value
English	Malay	64	355.39	69.40	3.37 ++
	Non-Malay	26	398.12	47.22	
Malay	Malay	65	404.35	34.61	3.09 +
	Non-Malay	26	360.79	68.42	

+ $p < 0.01$ ++ $p < 0.001$

From the table it could be stated that the non-Malay pupils performed significantly better on the English test than the Malay pupils. The Malay pupils on the other hand performed significantly better on the Malay test than their non-Malay counterparts. A likely factor could be that Malay is the mother tongue of the Malay pupils. The non-Malay pupils performed less well in Malay since it is their second or third languages.

Table 8 and 9 give an overall picture of the pupils' performance by ethnicity on the English and Malay tests respectively.

Table 9: Overall Performance in Malay Language Components by Ethnicity

Components	Race	n	Mean	S.D.	t-value
Composition	Malay Non Malay	65 26	59.66 44.88	15.38 16.48	3.94+++
Reading Comprehension	Malay Non Malay	65 26	72.46 65.38	19.52 19.02	1.59
Listening Comprehension	Malay Non Malay	65 26	93.54 85.06	13.63 22.49	1.81
Dictation	Malay Non Malay	65 26	93.69 81.00	6.23 20.67	3.08+
Oral	Malay Non Malay	47 19	82.77 63.68	21.33 10.36	3.73+++
Sound Discrimination	Malay Non Malay	65 26	85.00 84.52	18.37 7.26	1.30

+p < 0.05
+++p < 0.001

Table 10

Peformance in English Language Components by Ethnicity

Components	Race	n	Mean	S.D.	t-value
Composition	Malay Non Malay	65 26	48.10 57.31	18.29 13.70	2.62 ++
Reading Comprehension	Malay Non Malay	64 26	50.31 64.23	19.84 22.66	2.74 ++
Listening Comprehension	Malay Non Malay	65 26	85.69 95.00	17.58 7.07	3.60 +++
Dictation	Malay Non Malay	64 26	79.00 91.39	25.08 10.04	3.35 +++
Oral	Malay Non Malay	20 4	48.33 61.67	8.41 13.74	1.87
Sound Discrimination	Malay Non Malay	65 26	89.73 90.19	8.42 10.25	0.20

++ $p < 0.01$
+++ $P < 0.001$

In the Malay test (Table 9) significant differences in performance were observed in three of the six components, ie composition, dictation and oral comprehension, in which the Malay pupils performed much better. There was no statistically significant difference in performance in sound discrimination, listening comprehension and reading comprehension. A possible explanation could be that at the L2 level it will be much more difficult to gain proficiency for the higher skilled components like composition and

dictation as compared to sound discrimination, listening and reading comprehension. In the same way oral expression also involved considerable cognitive language skill.

In the English test (Table 10) significant differences in performance were observed in four of the six components, ie listening comprehension, dictation, reading comprehension and composition where the non-Malay pupils performed much better. No significant difference was recorded between sound discrimination and oral expression where the sample size was too small from which to generalise.

The Performance of Malay Boys and Girls

Further analysis examine the performance scores of the Malay pupils by sex. Of the 65 Malay pupils in the sample 35 were boys and 30 girls. Results showed that there was no significant difference in overall performance between Malay boys and girls at this age on the overall English test as well as in all of its components, but significant differences in performance was observed for the Malay Language tests in composition writing ($t = 3.44$, $p > 0.001$) and sound discrimination ($t = 2.57$, $p > 0.01$).

Table 11

Language	Sex	n	Overall	S.D.	t-value
English (including oral)	F M	29 35	352.46 357.82	74.31 66.05	-0.30 ns
Malay (including oral and reading aloud)	F M	30 35	413.75 396.30	34.42 33.16	2.07 (p>0.05)

Malay girls performed significantly better in Malay composition than Malay boys but these boys performed significantly better than the girls in the sound discrimination tests.

Conclusion

The above strategy of comparing the bilingual ability of the Malay and non-Malay pupils had identified certain differences in performance between the two groups in which the dominant home language of the pupils whether English or Malay could be a contributive factor affecting their proficiency. At a lower level ie. the pre-school level Malay children were found to perform as well as the non-Malays who are in the same socio-economic class in their bilingual tasks (Kamsiah, 1986).

If any inference could be made from the two separate studies, there is indication that the Malay pupils had gained a higher proficiency in their mother tongue than in English; but at the same time considerable progress in their EL proficiency could also be observed. There is evidence to support that what is obtained is only 'surface fluency' i.e. the ability to cope with everyday communication (Cummins, 1984). Teacher could do much more to improve the pupils in cognitively related "internal fluency" in the mother tongue and in this respect pupils already acquired language skills could be used as a springboard to acquire lateral or more complex skills in English Language as well as in other subject areas.

More studies could be done to examine the nature of the transfer from one language to another within each linguistic group taking into account their different values, culture and religious belief.

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