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EDUCATION RESEARCH FUNDING PROGRAMME

# PROJECT CLOSURE REPORT



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

By

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# **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

## **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 pre-school Malay children and their families 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 as well as creating a space for them to explore their personal identities (Ma, 2008; Sneddon, 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.

## **PURPOSE OF STUDY**

This study aims to contribute to our understanding of multilingual development by:

- (a) identifying the strategies used by children who are learning to read using dual language text;
- (b) identifying the strategies used by parents and guardians in working with children who are learning to read using dual language text;
- (c) exploring the nature of the transfer of strategies, concepts and skills between languages;
- (d) exploring the impact on metalinguistic understanding and comprehension of reading a story simultaneously in two languages; and
- (e) studying the effect of the reading activities on children's evolving personal and learner identities.

## **PARTICIPANTS**

Ten children from four kindergartens (two PCF and two mosque 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.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study is essentially a qualitative study and aims to investigate the impact of reading DLBs on children and adults. 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. Different typeface or ink colour is used to call attention to the difference in languages.

Three parent-child observations at home and two peer reading observations in school were conducted, with two additional home observations carried out on four of the children for a deeper study. 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 fieldnotes 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.

## **FINDINGS**

The present study has yielded several important findings:

### **1. Strategies used by children who are learning to read using dual language text**

The strategies in evidence are very varied. Children approach the books in different ways: choosing to read the whole story in one language first before reading in the other language, or reading both languages on the same page. The better readers make use of the context of narratives, relating the stories to their personal experience, using clues from illustrations, and checking the text for translation. Others use logographic recognition, phoneme blending and sub-lexical analysis. There is 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 and passive knowledge of Malay 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 pronunciation (JR)<sup>1</sup> for the school-approved Sebutan Baku pronunciation (SB), thereby clearly indicating that they were reading with understanding.

Sub-lexical analysis seems appropriate given the transparency of Malay orthography while whole-word recognition is more appropriate for English. However there is evidence that some of the 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, ranging from simple to highly complex structures. 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 themselves suggest that four of the children experienced a clear benefit from the project in terms of increased interest and competence in speaking and/or reading in Malay.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

Two children were already able to read, speak and understand in both languages and thus had little need for dual language text which was conceived of as a scaffolding to help children access the less familiar language. These children savoured the DLBs for their stories which stimulated bilingual conversation between the children and their parents and peers.

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

### **IMPLICATION TO POLICY MAKERS**

The present study yields two policy implications.

First, 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.

Second, there is 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 primary level. One strategy would be to ensure that more 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.

### **IMPACT TO SCHOOLS**

The present study yields several pedagogical and methodological implications.

First, 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 the teaching resources. This leaves 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.

Second, 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.

Finally, SB artificially irons out the few divergent letter-sound correspondences in JR pronunciation making Malay orthography even 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.

## **CONCLUSION**

The pilot study explores key dimensions of variation that impact on Malay children's literacy development and their responses in different literacy settings. A striking feature of the data collected is its multidimensional nature. It reveals the very complex nature of bilingual literacy development and offers valuable information on the range of factors that influence how children and family members approach the reading of DLBs. A larger study could build on this information and explore in greater depth some of the factors of variation as well as issues that would arise from the inclusion of the other officially taught MTs and the use of DLBs by teachers and pupils in the classroom.

## **KEYWORDS**

Dual language books; bilingual strategies, biliteracy; language transfer; metalinguistic awareness

# LEARNING TO BE BILITERATE IN ENGLISH AND MALAY USING DUAL LANGUAGE BOOKS

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## INTRODUCTION

Research on bilingual learning using dual language books (DLBs) has demonstrated its cognitive and cultural benefits. However, studies have been limited, and conducted in monolingual educational settings such as in the UK. This study is set in Singapore where the language-in-education policy is officially bilingual: from the start of schooling, English is the medium of all content-area instruction while the mother tongue (henceforth MT: Mandarin, Malay or Tamil) is studied as a subject. Nevertheless, classrooms in Singapore, as in the UK, remain largely monolingual spaces. Students have little opportunity to engage in tasks bilingually in both schools and preschools.

One consequence of allocating a premier role for English and the employment of monolingual strategies in the teaching of content is the shift towards English as the spoken language of the home and main aim of literacy learning (Pakir, 2000). Records from the Ministry of Education (MOE) show that more Primary 1 Malay pupils are coming from English-speaking homes – 13% in 1991 to 37% in 2010. The shift is even more substantial among Chinese and Indian children. Another survey on Primary 6 students in 2010 shows a more nuanced picture of language use. For Malay language students, 50% use predominantly Malay at home while 17% use English. The remaining third use both English and Malay at home (Ministry of Education, 2010).

A study of young Malay children's home literacy (Abu Bakar, 2007) reveals that parents believe that English is the key to "getting their children on" in mainstream Singapore society; that

being able to speak English well is important preparation for their eventual success in school, and that their children will pick up the 'MT' when they begin school. For families whose dominant home language is Malay, English is also spoken but as a second language, particularly among the children and in relation to school work. What is noticeable in all these families (English- or Malay-dominant) is the dominance of English texts in the home compared with Malay texts (storybooks, audio-visual materials).

Measures have been put in place by the MOE to address the situation. One was to modify the mother tongue syllabus to match more realistically the proficiency expectations in the schools to the learning capabilities of students coming from different language backgrounds (MOE press release, 9 January 2004). The other was to make language lessons more 'fun', adopt innovative teaching methods, recognise the constraints resulting from the child's home language background, including the willingness to use English to teach Chinese, and use IT and drama to increase interest in the language (MOE press releases, 23 February 2004, 17 November 2009). But these measures are specific: they pertain to how particular languages (such as English and MT) are supposed to be taught in the schools as well as what levels of proficiency might be expected of learners. The general policy of allocating roles between English and the mother tongues and employing monolingual instructional strategies remain largely intact.

To supplement efforts by the MOE in the teaching and learning of English and the MT Languages, the Lee Kuan Yew Fund for Bilingualism was set up in 2011 specifically to "nurture a love for bilingual learning in children from young in the pre-schools, at home and in the community" (Ministry of Education, 2012). Among the Fund's efforts include supporting a number of DLB projects in the hope that young children will be encouraged to read in the MT as they read the English text. Thus far, there has been no study to ascertain their usefulness in furthering the Fund's aims. Studies conducted in Singapore on bilingual learning and biliteracy have been scarce (but see Curdt-Christiansen et al, 2014; Vaish & Subhan, 2015), not to mention studies on

DLBs. The present study aims to contribute to the literature by exploring bilingual learning in young pre-school Malay children as they learn to read English and Malay using DLBs.

## **RESEARCH BACKGROUND**

### **Bilingual learning**

Research has indicated particular aspects of the learning process that can be enhanced by working bilingually: conceptual transfer, translation and interpretation, increasing knowledge about how language works, linking new material to familiar worlds, and building learner identities (Christian, 1996; Tosi, 1984; Tuafuti & McCaffery, 2005; Williams et al., 1996). This is based on the idea that the general cognitive skills that underpin language use operate from a common central function, and that the ability to make sense of print transfers readily even when scripts are different (Cummins, 1984, 1991; Cummins et al., 1984). This theoretical framework has been the basis for many of the successful bilingual approaches currently in use in the English-speaking world today where the level of development of bilingual children's mother tongue has a positive impact on the learning of a second language (Gardner, 2000; Oller & Eilers, 2002) and on their academic performance (Christian, 1996; Tuafuti & McCaffery, 2005). The question addressed by the present study is whether and how working bilingually might benefit pre-school children in Singapore. Would bilingual learning, where both languages are used in a literacy activity such as reading, lead to positive effects?

The transfer of literacy skills across languages can be two-way such that children who have become dominant in the school language (e.g., English) can make use of the reading skills acquired in school to become literate in the home language (e.g., Malay) (Cummins, 2001). It would be important to investigate if and how such skills come into play differently for pre-school children who are stronger in English and those who are stronger in Malay. Additionally, does such transfer still operate usefully for children in our sample who, rather than

trying to make sense of an entirely new language, are working with two already familiar languages?

Bilingual learning also provides children with the opportunity to draw on cultural understandings built up in one language when working with texts or practices in another language (Kenner *et al.*, 2008; Sneddon, 2008a). In the context of this study, when both worlds are relatively familiar to the children, the question is whether and how bilingual activities give children the chance to use and extend their bicultural knowledge.

Bilingual learning is also known to have raised students' motivation and pride in their English and MT achievements (Sneddon, 2008a), and improve self-esteem, self-identity, and self-confidence (Tuafuti & McCaffery, 2005). There is evidence in Cummins and Early's work of the value to pupils' self-esteem of celebrating their language and literacy skills in the MT within the wider school community (Cummins & Early, 2011). Since identities are continually renegotiated through interactions in and outside of the classroom, it is important to investigate whether and how pre-school children's involvement in bilingual processes affects the construction of their learner identities.

### **Dual language books in bilingual learning**

One way of supporting bilingual children is through the DLBs. By seeing texts in the MT and English alongside each other, children can work out correspondences and differences between the languages, adding to their knowledge of both. In one study, Sneddon and Patel (2003) found evidence, from children's re-telling of stories encountered in Gujarati and English dual language texts, of complex negotiations of meaning across both languages.

Parental assistance enables children to understand dual language storybooks better, as demonstrated by Ma (2008) in a study with Chinese families. DLBs also enabled parents to help their children become additive bilinguals in a situation in which they were beginning to lose the active use of their first language. In Sneddon's study of two Albanian girls' response to the reading

of dual language books in English and Albanian, she noted that the girls have embraced their identities as successful learners of English and showed pride in their Albanian identity (Sneddon, 2008a). In short, dual language texts 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 and creating a space for them to explore their personal identities. In the present study, the focus is on children reading DLBs with a parent and peers.

### **Types of dual language books**

DLBs have been used by parents and teachers to read and share with children in a bedtime story or shared home reading situation. They are not instructional readers for the children to be taught how to read by themselves. In the present study, DLBs are used as scaffolding to support slower readers to develop their reading skills in the non-dominant language (usually Malay).

In the literature, three possible types of DLBs for use in the study can be identified:

1. Stories written in English (by foreign/Western authors based on Western European folk tale tradition) with translations in the target language;
2. Stories written in English (by local authors and inspired by the local context) with translations in the local/target language;
3. Stories written in the target language (by authors native to the target language and culture) with translations in English.

Type 1 storybooks usually contain some words/concepts in the foreign language (e.g., English) that might not be commonly used in the target language (e.g., Malay). Type 2 storybooks might mitigate some of the problems associated with Type 1 books given that the stories depict local contexts that might be familiar to the focal children. Type 3 books most usually reflect the focal children's community's "cultural identity and literary heritage as well as their language

knowledge” (Sneddon, 2008: 140). In helping young bilingual children build a strong base in their heritage language, DLBs that are “written from the perspective of the home culture and translated into English” thus “making them more culturally relevant” (i.e., Type 3 books) are usually recommended (Blackledge, 2000: 86). More than half of the DLBs specially developed for the present study comprise stories with a Malay cultural focus.

In addition, DLBs come in a variety of formats:

1. Full-text translations, where two languages appear on the same page;
2. Single-language translations, where the books are published entirely in one language, with whole book translations into another language; and
3. Embedded text, where sprinkling of words in a target language appear throughout a story that is written primarily in a dominant language.

Depending on the intended use of the books, one format may be more useful than the other (Semingson et al., 2015). The advantage of full-text translations is that a reader can read primarily in one language but use the other language as a resource when comprehension starts to break down. Full-text translations also allow space for bilingual learning to take place such as when readers compare and contrast the two languages as they read. In the present study, all the DLBs used are full-text translations where a different typeface or ink colour is used to call attention to the difference in languages. The disadvantage of full-text translations is that readers might read only the text that is in their stronger language and ignore the other language (Freeman et al., 2011). This might indeed happen with the children in the present study if left on their own to read. However, the study is interested in the instances when the children read in the presence of an adult with authority who can guide them to read in the different languages (e.g., the parent as the reading partner at home, and the researcher when mediating the peer reading).

## **STATEMENT OF PROBLEMS**

In the context of Singapore's official bilingual policy in education and based on the PI's specialist academic as well as local knowledge of school and literacy practices in Malay speaking families (Abu Bakar, 2007, 2015a), the research has identified issues that act against the development of a strong bilingual and biliteracy proficiency among Malay pupils in Singapore schools. English is the main language of instruction, in use for all subjects other than 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 (Abu Bakar, 2015b). 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.

## **PURPOSE OF STUDY**

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 DLBs. Specifically, it aims to contribute to our understanding of multilingual development by:

1. identifying the strategies used by children who are learning to read using dual language text;
2. identifying the strategies used by parents and guardians in working with children who are learning to read using dual language text;
3. exploring the nature of the transfer of strategies, concepts and skills between languages;

4. exploring the impact on metalinguistic understanding and comprehension of reading a story simultaneously in two languages; and
5. studying the effect of the reading activities on children's evolving personal and learner identities.

By providing a detailed account of the strategies used by Malay parents and their pre-school children while engaging in tasks bilingually at home and with peers in school, the study also hopes to inform the design of a more extensive study that may include children from other ethnic and age groups as well as a study that develops partnership between parents and teachers through the use of DLBs at home and in the classroom.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The methodology was closely aligned with Sneddon's research in east London (Sneddon, 2008a, 2008b), using similar research questions and broad methodology but adapted for a larger sample and the more substantial research resources available. Using this approach enables the study to highlight the similarities and differences between the opportunities offered in an officially monolingual context (UK) and a bilingual educational context such as Singapore. Another significant contribution to knowledge is the ethnographic exploration of the language and literacy practices of the families of young children of kindergarten age as well as the literacy resources available to them, building on earlier ethnographic work by the PI (Abu Bakar, 2007, 2015a).

## **Participants**

The focal children were chosen from among those in the final year of kindergarten (aged 6). English is the medium of instruction in except during Malay language lessons. 12 children from four kindergartens (three children from each kindergarten) were initially shortlisted for (a) their

reported literacy in at least one language, and (b) their interest in storybooks. This information was culled from a questionnaire filled in by parents and confirmed after a discussion with the kindergarten principals. After the first interview with the parents (mostly the mothers) followed by a trial (1<sup>st</sup>) home observation two weeks later to ascertain if the children were receptive to being observed and recorded while reading, 10 children were finally selected. This small sample includes children with varying levels of exposure to Malay, varying language dominance, different levels of reading competence in both languages as well as economic circumstances.

## **Procedure**

During the first meeting with the parents, they were told that the project was interested to find out if books with text in two languages (the DLBs) were useful in helping children to read. The project would like the parents to try the DLBs with their children and, from their experience using the books, give the researchers feedback about how they and their children took to them, specifically (a) the ways they used the books to help their children read, particularly in a language that the children were not used to reading, (b) the ways the children themselves read the books (including whether they preferred to read only in their favourite language or also in the less preferred language), and (c) whether and how they and their children found it useful to have text in two languages on each page. The parents were encouraged to keep a journal to record their observations. It is instructive to note that as this research project aimed to explore strategies used naturally by children and parents, the latter were not given specific guidance on how to use the DLBs.

The parents were told that the researchers would visit them to observe their children read with them and to collect feedback about their experience. The children were also visited at their kindergarten to observe them read with their peers who were also participants in the project. Before the first meeting ended, the researchers planned with the parents a schedule for three parent-child reading sessions spaced two to three weeks apart. (The two peer reading sessions

were arranged separately with the kindergarten principal.) The parents could choose to read with their child any or all of the books they were given and that they should read just like they would at their leisure. The researchers sought early permission from the parents to audio/video record the reading sessions. The parent-child reading sessions were designed to provide information on how interaction with an adult develops children's reading skills (Kenner, 2004).

The first three of 11 DLBs (described below) were given to the family at the end of this first meeting. These three books were considered by the researchers to be the easiest of the 11 books. The next three books were given at the end of the 1st home observation and another two at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> home observation. After all the reading sessions were completed, a final meeting was held at the participants' homes where the researchers gathered the final feedback. They also used the opportunity to share with the parents their initial findings. The focal child was given a voucher and the 9<sup>th</sup> DLB as a parting gift. They were also allowed to keep all the eight books they had earlier received.

During this 'final meeting', the researchers sought permission from the parents of four of the 10 children to continue with the project for another two home reading sessions under Phase 2. These were children whom the researchers found to have benefitted most from their experience reading the DLBs with their parents in terms of their perceptible increased interest in, use of, and competency in, the weaker/less preferred language (Malay) both in speech and literacy, and so were worthy of a longer study. In particular, the study aimed to find out if the strategies used by children and adults in reading DLBs had evolved in any way. The parents, however, were simply told that the researchers would like them to try out two new DLBs that had just appeared in the market (which was indeed the case). Thus, two more parent-child reading sessions were carried out in the space of another four to five weeks, and when these were completed, another 'final' meeting was held at the home to share with the parents the researchers' findings. For these four children, the voucher and the '9<sup>th</sup>' DLB as a parting gift were withheld till this last meeting.

As for the peer reading sessions, they were designed to provide the child with different interactive dynamics through a different setting from the home and a different reading partner (Lee, 2014). Thus, other than to observe the children's understanding of how their two languages work and probe more deeply into their metalinguistic understanding (Sneddon, 2008a), the aim was also to observe how the children's use of the DLBs with their peers differed from that with their parents. During each peer reading session, a group of two or three children from the same pre-school were observed interacting, outside of curriculum time, while reading together any of the DLBs they had received at that point in time. These literacy events were also recorded.

In summary, three parent-child home observations (the 1<sup>st</sup> being the trial) and two peer reading observations in school were conducted for the 10 participating children. Two additional home observations were carried out on four of the children under Phase 2.

### **Dual language books used**

At the time the PI was preparing the research proposal, there were hardly any English-Malay dual language books in the market except for a few that were developed by the National Book Development Council of Singapore and funded by the Lee Kuan Yew Fund for Bilingualism (*Adil's Dining Table* was one of them). Fortunately, the PI taught a Diploma-level course at the National Institute of Education (NIE) which required trainee teachers to write children's stories in Malay as one of the assignments. The PI approached a local publisher who was receptive to the idea of publishing some of the stories as DLBs. From this source, four books were published in time for the research (*Budi The Hardworking Bear*, *BAM!*; *How Many More Days to Hari Raya?*; *The Little Chef*). In addition, the Collaborator sourced from the Ministry of Education (MOE), two children's stories in English and one traditional Malay story and republished them as DLBs (*My Grandpa*, *My Atuk*; *A Picture for Por Por*; *Oh Egret!*). The books by NIE students and from MOE were printed in limited copies for the sole purpose of the research. To add to the repertoire, the PI sought permission from a London-based publisher, which published DLBs in several

languages, to translate one into Malay (*The Little Red Hen and the Grains of Wheat*). Finally, towards the end of the project, just before the start of Phase 2, two new English-Malay DLBs became available commercially also funded by the Fund (*Makan Time*; *Ati's Baju Melayu*). In total, 11 DLBs were used in the project, categorised by Types as follows:

Table 1. *DLBs belonging to different categories*

<b>Type 1</b> (originally a Western folk tale in English)	<b>Type 2</b> (originally a local story in English)	<b>Type 3</b> (originally a story in Malay)
The Little Red Hen and the Grains of Wheat <sup>3</sup>	My Grandpa, My Atuk <sup>1</sup>	Budi The Hardworking Bear <sup>1</sup>
	Adil's Dining Table <sup>2</sup>	BAM! <sup>1</sup>
	A Picture for Por Por <sup>2</sup>	How Many More Days to Hari Raya? <sup>2</sup>
	Makan Time <sup>4</sup>	Oh, Egret <sup>3</sup>
		Ati's Baju Melayu <sup>4</sup>
		The Little Chef <sup>*</sup>

Notes: <sup>1, 2, 3</sup> = books given out for the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> home reading sessions respectively.

<sup>4</sup> = books given out for the additional two reading sessions.

<sup>\*</sup> = book as a parting gift

Thus, following Blackledge (2000), the DLBs used in the project were all of Type 3 and 2 except one of Type 1. The books were arranged in increasing order of difficulty and distributed to the participants in four batches (numbered in Table 1) in the way described in the Procedure section.

## Data collection

Data was collected via ethnographic fieldnotes and digital video and audio recording. During the reading sessions, the researchers were on the lookout for strategies used by both the children and the parents/siblings, for interactions between participants, for evidence of transfer at the

grapho-phonemic, syntactic and semantic levels, for evidence of implicit or explicit metalinguistic understanding, and for responses to the overall meaning of the texts and to the cultural contexts.

On learner identity, the researchers observed for signals that tell whether the children were keen or reluctant to read in Malay, whether they were enjoying the books they read as they deploy strategies to decode and understand text, how persistent and determined they were in making sense of the texts in front of them, and how rapidly they worked their way through all the available texts. In the course of the reading sessions, the researchers also kept notes of attempts (if any) by the children to redefine themselves, for instance, from admitting to not being 'good readers' in a particular language to being highly motivated, or vice-versa.

All the above happened spontaneously and were noted in context. However, on a few occasions where the researchers were unsure of some of the participants' actions and expressions, during the researchers' next visit, they showed the children and their parents extracts from the video-recording and asked them what was going on. On several other occasions, the researchers engineered situations to encourage the children to talk about their experience reading the DLBs.

When all the reading sessions were completed, the parents were interviewed on how they perceived the children's biliteracy development both within and outside of the observation sessions: whether reading the DLBs provided positive experiences for the children, the extent to which the children saw themselves as successful student learners, the impact the experiences had on their confidence and pride in using Malay at home and in public, and whether they were able to move between languages and cultures thus reflecting their personal identity as bilinguals. The teachers were also interviewed for their observation of any differences in class in the way the children carried themselves as readers and their attitude towards learning.

## **Data analysis**

As a qualitative study, the recordings of the reading sessions and interviews were transcribed and, following Kenner *et al.* (2008), discussed line by line with an experienced teacher of Malay and English. The utterances were 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 relate to their peers as bilingual co-learners, and how children and their parents relate to each other as they negotiate the reading task.

Reports of the individual children were made which brought together information obtained from family members, teachers and the children themselves with observational records from reading sessions in the home and in the kindergarten settings. Each of these reports presents a detailed case study. The combination of both the written ethnographic and video evidence brought the project to life and offered a rich description of the language environment and practices in the home.

## **FINDINGS / RESULTS**

The very complex data have been analysed and interpreted, and presented below in relation to the research questions:

### **1. Strategies used by children who are learning to read using dual language text**

The strategies in evidence are very varied. Children approached the books in different ways: choosing to read the whole story in one language first before reading in the other language, or reading both languages on the same page (or even starting in the middle – choosing a favourite page). It was quite evident that for many of the children, English was their preferred language and so they usually began reading the English text first particularly during peer reading. However, with the guiding authority of their mothers and the researcher (during peer reading), the children gradually came around to read the Malay text with more interest.

The more fluent readers, including those exposed to Malay at home, made use of the context of narratives, relating the stories to their personal experience, using clues from illustrations, and checking the text for translation. The less fluent readers used logographic recognition, phoneme blending and sub-lexical analysis (reading syllable by syllable) especially those who were not able to guess quickly enough less familiar printed Malay words. Yet others depended on the attending parent for help, which was crucial in reading aloud unfamiliar words and showing the corresponding English words in the text. There was substantial variation in the extent to which children engaged with the meaning of the texts as they read.

Children reading in peer groups of two or three decided on their own who to read in which language; others required instructions from the researcher. The more fluent readers sometimes competed with each other; at other times they collaborated. The slower readers also showed enthusiasm to read but while some persevered with help from the better readers, others chose to

read only the repeated phrases which were easier to memorise, yet others gave up after a few tries. Both strong and weaker readers seemed to enjoy reading aloud together.

Excerpt 1 illustrates the peer dynamics. Here, the children collaborated in reading *Budi, The Hardworking Bear*: Sufian filling in a word for Nabilah (line 2 and 7), Faiz correcting Nabilah (line 5), and Nabilah correcting Sufian (line 8). The children also acted out the story: Sufian exaggerating the attempt by the main character to open the cookie jar (line 9), Faiz doing the same by adding in his own words (line 11), and Nabilah assuming the main character by feigning frustration (line 8). It is instructive to note that in this and in other peer groups, the children appeared at ease reading together, engaging with the story, asking questions or giving opinions about languages, words or story plots both monolingually and bilingually. In this excerpt, Sufian, who was not as eager reading with his father at home, enjoyed reading with his peers.

Excerpt 1. *Reading collaboratively among peers*

1. Nabilah:	"Budi is...is..."
2. Sufian:	"hungry"
3. Faiz:	"helping"
4. Nabilah:	"...hungry...helping..."
5. Faiz:	"after helping"
6. Nabilah:	"after helping all his family members. He opens a kitchen cabinet and sees a jar of"
7. Sufian:	"cookies!"
8. Nabilah:	"...chocolate cookies. 'Why can't I open this cookie jar?'" (feigning frustration)
9. Sufian:	Urghh...urghh...(pretending to open the cookie jar)
10. Nabilah:	"whispers Budi. 'It's so tight...', he...sighs."
11. Faiz:	Ah...so tight... (sighing)

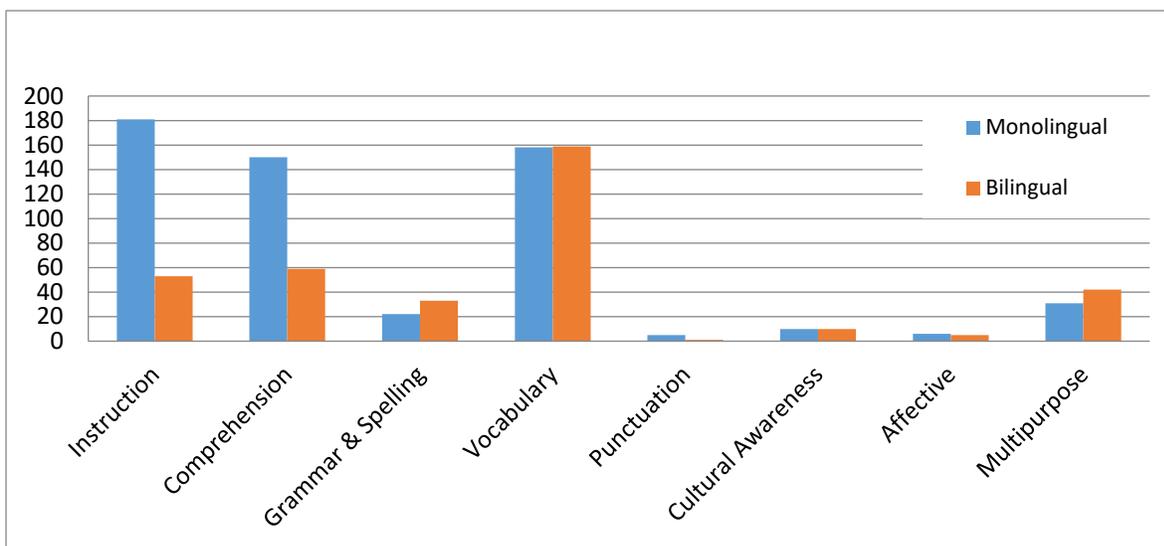
Note: The text being read is in inverted commas ("..."); all others are extended discourse.

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

As this study aimed to explore strategies used naturally by parents, no specific guidance was offered on the use of DLBs. 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. Parents could initiate a conversation in a language different from the language of the text being read, or code-switch between both languages. They could also ask the child for the translation of a word. Table 2 documents the number of monolingual and bilingual turns taken by two mothers over the course of five reading sessions. A turn is considered monolingual if the entire stretch (the text read and the extended discourse) is in one language, while a bilingual turn is one where the mother code-switches in her discourse and/or speaks in a language different from the text being read aloud. Common in the two mothers is the extensive use of bilingual codes to ask for or explain the meaning of words.

Table 2. *Purposes of two mothers' talk turns: Monolingual vs bilingual turns*



The study has also identified a particular issue of concern not peculiar to reading of dual language text, where parents thought that decoding was ‘reading’ and failed to engage their children with the meaning of the text. This resulted in a number of children who decoded competently but failed to understand, in one language or another, and in some cases in both, what they were reading.

### 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, funds of knowledge (Moll et al, 1992) and passive knowledge of Malay to access Malay words. Excerpt 2 shows Iman, the eldest son of non-graduate parents, tapping on his passive knowledge of Malay in critiquing the book’s translation of an English word. He was not agreeable to ‘warm’ being translated to ‘*panas*’ (‘hot’) (lines 1 & 5) and, to the mother’s delight, offered his own translation, ‘*hangat*’ (‘warm’) (line 9). The boy’s knowledge was previously hidden from the mother as English was the more common language spoken between the two.

#### Excerpt 2. *Tapping on passive knowledge of Malay*

1. Iman:	<i>Ini ‘panas’, kenapa ini ‘warm’?</i> Tak sama. [This is ‘panas’ (hot), why is this ‘warm’? It’s not the same.]
2. Mdm Istilah:	<i>Eh, ‘panas’ Melayu kan?</i> [Isn’t ‘panas’ a Malay word?]
3. Iman:	<i>‘Warm’ pun?...</i> [And so is ‘warm’?...]
4. Mdm Istilah:	<i>Ah, ‘warm’ bahasa...?</i> [‘Warm’ is in which language?]
5. Iman:	<i>Tapi ‘warm’ ‘warm’, lepas tu ‘panas’ ‘panas’!</i> (frustrated) [But ‘warm’ is ‘warm’ and ‘panas’ (‘hot’) is ‘panas’]
6. RA:	<i>‘Panas’ in English apa eh?</i> [What is ‘panas’ in English?]
7. Iman:	<i>Ah? ‘Hot’ lah. ‘Cold’? ‘Cold’ ‘sejuk’.</i> [It’s ‘hot’ of course.]
8. Mdm Istilah:	<i>Ahhh. Habis kalau ‘warm’ in Melayu apa agaknya?</i> [So what might ‘warm’ be in Malay?]
9. Iman:	<i>‘Hangat!’ ‘Hangat!’ ‘Hangat!’</i> [Warm!]

In the next excerpt, a child demonstrated his ability to appropriate his funds of knowledge including in Malay for a reading task. Excerpt 3 shows Sharif inserting a word (*'Lauk'* = dishes or food) for Naimah (line 2) while reading together in school. Naimah was better at reading and speaking in English than Malay. At the time of the study, however, she had just discovered, through her mother, a successful technique for decoding Malay – the sub-lexical breakdown method – and thus enjoyed 'reading' in Malay. But she was not familiar with, and did not understand, many Malay words. Sharif, on the other hand, was the least literate of the children but responded particularly well to reading with peers in a classroom setting. Although he was fond of communicating in English since entering kindergarten, he had extensive exposure to colloquial Malay at home. In this excerpt, Naimah was taking her time decoding Malay words syllable by syllable while an impatient Sharif was listening to the story, not looking at the text. While Naimah was figuring out how to segment two adjacent vowels in the word *'la-uk'* into two syllables, Sharif filled in the word for her, obviously making full use of his substantial funds of knowledge in Malay.

Excerpt 3. *Accessing meaning from funds of knowledge in Malay*

1. Naimah:	<i>"Se..le, se..le..pas ber..bu, ber..bu..ka, pu..a, pu..a..sa, saya dan Mimi menolong ibu meng..ha, me, meng..han..tar, la, la la..u...</i> [After breaking our fast, Mimi and I helped Mum deliver various dishes...]
2. Sharif:	(appeared bored listening to Naimah's reading) <i>Lauk!</i> (without looking at the text) [Dishes!]

There is evidence that some children who spoke colloquial Malay were encountering the standard language through the DLBs. For fluent Malay speakers, a very interesting feature of the data is the way in which they substituted Johor-Riau pronunciation (JR) for the school-approved Sebutan Baku pronunciation (SB),<sup>2</sup> thereby clearly indicating that they were reading with

<sup>2</sup> JR pronunciation is traditionally associated with both colloquial and standard Malay (the difference between the two varieties is in grammar and vocabulary). 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.

understanding. For instance, Sharif pronounced 'lauk' as JR /la-oʔ/ rather than SB /la-uʔ/. For less fluent speakers, they used the sub-lexical approach to pronounce unfamiliar words that were consistent with SB but pronounced the JR way for words they knew. Parents were concerned that their children would be penalised for not using SB even if they speak standard Malay when they enter primary school.

Naimah was using sub-lexical analysis to read the Malay text which seems to be an appropriate strategy given the transparency of Malay orthography. On the other hand, whole-word recognition is more appropriate for English. However there is evidence that some of the transfer strategies used by some children were unhelpful such as the use of sub-lexical analysis when reading in English, leading to confusion with phonology. The presence of a parent, in some cases, was crucial in making the child aware of the different ways of decoding different languages.

#### **4. Metalinguistic understanding and 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. Excerpt 4 shows Faiz, whom we met in Excerpt 1, reading English and Malay texts with his mother. Faiz came from an English-dominant household and his parents were highly educated. English story books were aplenty in the home compared to Malay books. Yet, like Iman whom we met in Excerpt 2, Faiz had passive knowledge of Malay which he showed in this excerpt. In the book, *My Grandpa, My Atuk*, the English sentence 'Grandpa has a big laugh' is translated to Malay as 'Atuk boleh ketawa besar' (literally meaning 'Grandpa can laugh big'). While this may sound ungrammatical in English, it is the more appropriate translation in Malay than 'Atuk ada ketawa besar' ('Grandpa has a big laugh'). Thus, the noun phrase 'a big laugh' has been translated to a verb phrase '(boleh) ketawa besar' ((can) 'laugh loud'). When Faiz was asked by his mother "what is 'ketawa besar' (line 8), he did not simply read off the English phrase

in the book but translated the Malay phrase himself with ‘ketawa’ as a verb as in the Malay text rather than a noun as in the text in English. In addition, he did not literally translate ‘ketawa besar’ as ‘laugh big’ but chose a more grammatically accepted English phrase ‘laugh loud’. On other occasions, Faiz struggled with the practice of translation and had still to grasp the nature of the different sentence structure between EL and ML. However in this excerpt, he demonstrated understanding of the complex structure of the dual language text even as he required help in decoding it (lines 1, 3 & 5).

Excerpt 4. *Understanding syntactic-semantic nuances of different languages*

1. Faiz	“I... call my Grandpa, Atuk. Grandpa... has a big (pause) “
2. Mdm Maryani	“laugh.”
3. Faiz	“laugh. Ha! Ha! Ha!” “ <i>Saya... pe...</i> ”
4. Mdm Maryani	“ <i>pang-</i> “
5. Faiz	“ <i>pang-</i> “
6. Mdm Maryani	“ <i>gil.</i> ”
7. Faiz	“ <i>gil datuk saya Atuk. Atuk boleh ketawa besar. Ha! Ha! Ha!</i> ” [“call my Grandpa, Atok. Grandpa has a big laugh.”]
8. Mdm Maryani	‘ <i>Ketawa besar</i> ’ tu apa? [What is ‘ketawa besar’?]
9. Faiz	Laugh loud.

There was also some evidence of children 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. One example can be seen in Excerpt 5 where Mirza’s mother, a polytechnic graduate housewife, was engaging him while reading together *Budi The Hardworking Bear*. Like the other children, Mirza was more used to English literacy. Here, he correctly translated ‘jar’ (*balang*) in “a jar of chocolate cookies” (“*balang biskut coklat*”) (line 3) and was acknowledged by his mother (line 4). In the same turn, she asked for the meaning of ‘cookies’ which he incorrectly offered as ‘*coklat*’ (line 5) obviously relying on English word order

to identify the equivalent Malay word. However, his mother’s correction (line 6) brought some awareness to Mirza when he exclaimed “terbalik!” (“It is reversed!”) (line 7).

Excerpt 5. *Language awareness of word order*

1. Mirza:	“A jar of chocolate cookies.”
2. Mdm Sarimah:	<i>Nanti, nanti, nanti. ‘Jar’ cakap Melayu apa?</i> [Hold on. What is ‘jar’ in Malay?]
3. Mirza:	<i>Umm...umm...umm... Balang?</i>
4. Mdm Sarimah:	<i>Balang. Cookies?</i>
5. Mirza:	Umm...Coklat!
6. Mdm Sarimah:	<i>Biskut...</i> [Cookies]
7. Mirza:	<i>Terbalik!</i> [It is reversed!]

## 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. Excerpt 6 is an example of children helping their weaker peer by correcting pronunciation and explaining meaning. Here, it was Faiz’s turn to read in Malay. Faiz was having difficulty decoding (lines 1, 3 & 5) but Sufian came in to fill in the words for him (lines 2, 4 & 7). Nabilah, the more successful reader, then added a comment to explain what ‘lucu’ (‘funny’) meant.

Excerpt 6. *Linguistic exploration and meaning making among peers*

1. Faiz:	“ <i>Atuk men...ke...</i> ” [He tells...]
2. Sufian:	“ <i>rit...ta...kan</i> ” [tells...]
3. Faiz:	“ <i>rit...ta...kan saya ki...</i> ” [tells me...]
4. Sufian:	“ <i>kisah-kisah</i> ” [stories]
5. Faiz:	“ <i>kisah-kisah la...cu</i> ” [funny stories]
7. Sufian:	<i>Lucu!</i> [Funny!]
8. Nabilah:	<i>Lucu tu kelakar!</i> [Funny means amusing!]

Observations and interview data from parents, teachers and the children themselves suggest that four of the children from the main group of 10 (including Faiz, Iman and Mirza) have experienced a clear benefit from the project in terms of increased interest and competence in speaking and/or reading in Malay. They have been observed to be using more Malay in the home, a corresponding growth in their English vocabulary, and an interest in finding more DLBs. In no small measure was their success attributed to their mothers who took time to be with their children as they negotiated the DLBs. As Iman's mother observed: "I have been able to observe him... In comparison to before (prior to the study), his Malay has become really good. We used not to speak so much Malay but in reading the books, our Malay has become more fluent." Faiz's mother echoed the same sentiment: "I think he is more aware of Malay books now, and then he is more willing to read Malay books. And then I think I find he's trying to speak more Malay nowadays..."

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

The remaining four children (including Sufian, Naimah and Sharif) demonstrated how the DLBs had moderate to little or no impact and these were due to factors such as little parental involvement, different notions of what parents count as reading, ineffective parental strategies such as reading as a task rather than for pleasure, and low reading ability of the child, all of which reduce the value of any programme that encourages parents to read with their children, and not particularly to reading DLBs. As Faiz's mother has cautioned: "...these books will need someone to sit down beside them (the children) to fully utilise the usefulness of the books."

As to the utility of the DLBs, Mirza's mother had this to say in Malay: "I think everyone needs this help (DLBs) but they don't know where to go.... They look at everyone (speak English),

they follow. They forget that Malay... now that I'm using Malay, I start to feel the importance of Malay. I want to tell them to speak in Malay or risk disadvantaging their child, that kind of thing."

## **IMPLICATIONS**

The present study yields several pedagogical, policy, and methodological implications.

First, the project has benefited from the development of DLBs with a Malay cultural focus. A particular strength of DLBs is the way in which they can support the learning of reading 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.

Second, there is 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 primary level. One strategy would be to ensure that more 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.

Third, 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 the teaching resources. This leaves 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 purpose of the different strategies were made explicit and if strategy convergence could be agreed on where appropriate. It is important to support teaching strategies that avoid children re-inventing the wheel and help those children who are less successful at doing so.

Third, 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 mother tongue 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.

Finally, 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 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 and has links with the children's cultural roots.

## **CONCLUSION**

This pilot study explores key dimensions of variation that impact on Malay children's literacy development and their responses in different literacy settings namely, mother and child reading at home and peer reading outside of curriculum time in the kindergarten. A striking feature of the data collected is its multidimensional nature. It reveals the very complex nature of bilingual literacy development and offers valuable information on the range of factors that influence how children and family members approach the reading of DLBs. A larger study could build on this information and explore in greater depth some of the factors of variation as well as issues that would arise from the inclusion of the other officially taught MTs and the use of DLBs by teachers and pupils in the classroom.

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## NOTES

To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms have been used in place of the actual names of parents and children in this study.

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