
Title	How bilingual are Singaporean preschoolers? Preliminary findings from the home school transition study
Author(s)	Viniti Vaish

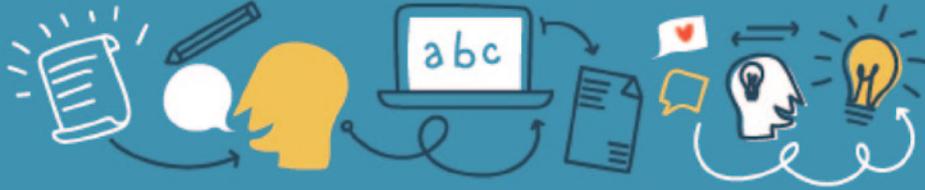
Copyright © 2018 National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University (NIE NTU), Singapore

This is the published version of the following article:

Vaish, V. (2018). How bilingual are Singaporean preschoolers? Preliminary findings from the home school transition study. *OER Knowledge Bites*, 7, 7.

<https://ebook.ntu.edu.sg/20190607-oer-knowledge-bites-volume7/full-view.html>

LANGUAGE



How Bilingual are Singaporean Preschoolers? Preliminary Findings from the Home School Transition Study

By *Viniti Vaish*

Viniti Vaish is Associate Professor with the English Language & Literature Academic Group at the National Institute of Education. Her primary research interests are in the areas of bilingualism and biliteracy, cross-linguistic transfer in bilinguals, and enhancing bilingualism.

This study is about longitudinally documenting how bilingual preschoolers are when they enter Primary 1. Eighteen preschoolers (6 each from the Malay, Indian and Chinese ethnic groups in the 6–7-year-old age group) are observed at home, preschool and in Primary 1, resulting in a large data set of naturally occurring speech in English and Mother Tongue (MT). These speech samples are currently being coded for three main measures of expressive language: Mean Length of Utterance, Lexical Diversity and Discourse Complexity.

- » Mean Length of Utterance (MLUm): A count of the words and morphemes in one utterance. It is a measure of both language dominance and competence.
- » Lexical Diversity (LD): The number of word types a speaker knows in each of the languages that he/she speaks.
- » Discourse Complexity (DC): Knowledge of syntax a bilingual speaker displays in the languages that he/she speaks.

At the point of writing this paper, MLUm, LD and DC have been coded for the first home observation for six of the 18

subjects (two each from the Malay, Indian and Chinese ethnic groups).

Approximately 500 utterances per subject were coded for MLUm, LD and DC. The main findings for the six selected subjects during their first home observation were as follows:

- » All the subjects, except one, are English dominant as they produce more English-only utterances as compared with MT-only utterances. However, because the MLUm differentials are small, we can assume that all these children—though English dominant—are not substantially more competent in English than in their MT. Most of the subjects had higher MLUMs for translanguaged utterances as compared with English-only and MT-only utterances demonstrating that they are more expressive when they are allowed to mix languages freely in speech.
- » All six subjects demonstrated a wide gap in lexical knowledge between English and MT. They knew many more word types in English (nouns, verbs, adverbs etc.) than in their MT.
- » In both English and MT, the subjects produced mainly simple sentence structures with very few complex and compound structures, implying not only that their knowledge of syntax in both English and MT is similar but that it is also poor in both languages.

In conclusion, the trend in these findings that needs to be highlighted is that the children in this sample are in danger of losing their MT even though they are only in preschool. It is recommended

that preschoolers should be given an intervention to improve vocabulary in both English and MT, as this variable shows the widest gap, and it is the foundation for strong language acquisition. As the children already know the basic word types in English, due to cross-linguistic transfer, these words can easily be learned in the MT, followed by more complex vocabulary in both languages.

How to Cite

Vaish, V. (2018). How bilingual are Singaporean preschoolers? Preliminary findings from the home school transition study. *OER Knowledge Bites Volume 7* (pg. 7). Singapore: National Institute of Education.