Bilingualism and the literacy of young Singapore children

Abstract

Bilingualism in Singapore takes on a peculiar meaning. First, it means being competent in English and one of the officially recognized ‘mother tongue’ languages – Mandarin, Malay or Tamil. Second, English remains the more crucial language to learn as it is the working language of the country and the language through which education is received; the mother tongue is regarded as a vehicle for the transmission of one’s ethnic cultural values and is a compulsory subject in school. Interestingly, despite the bilingual policy, knowledge of one language rarely makes for a valuable resource in the learning of the other during language lessons – the learning of English is entirely in English, the mother-tongue language in the respective mother-tongue. In contrast, in the home setting, particularly where the mother-tongue language is dominant, the learning of English is often mediated through both English and the mother tongue.

This paper presents data on the home literacy of young Malay-speaking children and their first year experience in school. Examination of their reading activities at home with adults and siblings show a clear preponderance for the use of both English and Malay often in interesting and complex ways. In contrast, their experience in language lessons in school tells them to virtually keep one language in the bag. Despite bringing with them rich literacy experience to school, what seems to count more in the classroom is English; importantly, the one who lacks English struggles with the curriculum. These findings will be discussed in relation to children’s literacy and emergent bilingualism and implications for language pedagogy.