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[COLUMNIST] Mapping the literacy of bilingual children, home where it all begins

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18/05/2024 17:33 MYT



The exploration of oral language skills takes a twist when we consider children growing up in bilingual environments. -Pix by Dr Abdul Mutalib Embong

THE Dual Language Programme (DLP) is a program under the government's initiative to 'Empower Bahasa Malaysia and Strengthen English' policy, similar to a Bilingual Program.

The Dual Language Programme in Malaysia has been initiated at selected Malaysian primary and secondary schools in 2016.

In a recent development, the Sarawak dual-language programme (DLP) which uses English in teaching Mathematics and Science subjects, will be extended to its secondary schools with immediate effect.

In term of learning the English language, the DLP will help students improve their proficiency in the language.

This program equips teachers with the tools to deliver instruction in English, creating an environment that naturally improves English proficiency for both educators and students."

This initiative will greatly benefit children in rural areas, who primarily use their mother tongue at home.

There are numerous studies showing that bilingual children have advantages over their monolingual peers.

One of the most significant benefits of bilingualism is the bilingual children have the ability to speak more than one language. This opens doors in their future careers, travels, and personal connections.

They can bridge cultures, build stronger relationships with people from diverse backgrounds, and navigate the world with greater ease.

Not only that, being competent in many languages fosters their employment opportunities and boosts their self-development in a non-formal environment and recreational activities.

In Malaysia, English is the second language. Being bilinguals has positively impacted the children in their learning.

Not only bilingual children can easily communicate with people from other races and cultures, but also enhance their thinking and linguistic awareness.

Additionally, another bilingual advantage is its positive influence on the children's cognitive system.

The bilinguals are said to possess an active cognitive control mechanism which enables them to manage any language conflicts and utilize appropriate words and language in various contexts

The bilinguals' performance in the aspects of perspective taking, creative thinking, cultural empathy, and tolerance of ambiguity can be seen too.

Bilingualism is also evident to have a significant relationship with an improved cognitive aging that delays the occurrence of dementia disease.

Apart from the bilingual advantage in cognitive flexibility, children with a vast bilingual vocabulary and extensive exposure to more than a language exhibit greater social-emotional and behavioural abilities.

According to the Unesco's Institute of Statistics (UIS) report, Malaysia boasts a literacy rate of 94.64% in 2023. Meanwhile, based on GlobalData, Malaysia's literacy rate stood at 95.71% in 2021.

It means, most of the parents are capable of guiding their children in their language proficiency. At the same time, Malaysia has a long tradition of English medium education and bilingualism.

Therefore, acquiring more than a language is nothing new among the Malaysians. Parents can develop their children's ability to speak two or more languages at home.

For English language, home environment plays a significant role in the development of the thence language as a second language for children.

Home-literacy exposure, literacy activities, and literacy materials have been repeatedly found to facilitate children's acquisition of a language and their literacy practices.

Parents have a profound influence on their children's receptive language development, particularly during the early years.

Engaging in activities like shared reading and actively using the second language while interacting with their children creates a rich and stimulating environment that fosters language acquisition.

Moreover, it has also been found that the more amount of time spent on second language in the home, the better the child attained that language vocabulary.

Relatively, the amount of exposure at home to one language significantly has a major impact on the acquisition of the language children are exposed to.

Beside the natural environment the children unconsciously use and communicate in the language, formal education contributes to the dual language acquisition, where it is a conscious process to learn a language.

In other words, school language has profoundly influenced the primary language used by the children.



The formal education and schooling experience the children are exposed to develop their preference in acquiring the language taught in school.

It is crucial too for the educational institutions to play its role in shaping the bilingual ability of the children at a very young age.

Thus, pre-school education and its environment, for instance, can build the significant foundation for the language learning process and therefore positively contributed to the children's bilingual development.

This involves the bilingual education and teaching where the second language should be the language used in the classroom.

Nevertheless to say, it requires teachers' professionalism and competence as well as bilingual teaching in different subjects.

In nurturing bilingualism in school, the cooperation among teachers, parents and children is significantly essential.

The challenge confronting teachers and parents who support bilingual children is to think creatively and to provide these children the appropriate learning resources that are most urgently needed in the second language context.

By doing this, it can reap a range of rewards, as given that linguistic diversity means a powerful impact to the children. Bilingualism is seen as a sign of cognitive power, perseverance and a good individual asset.

When it comes to raising bilingual children, myths and misunderstandings are common, thus parents need to show their assistance by providing their children with the linguistic input and good support to foster bilingual development and avoiding confusion later.

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