

Is more always better (or can less be best)?

It may seem obvious that, if you want to speak, read or write a language well, you will need to spend time on it – studying, practising, making mistakes and trying again.

However, does that mean that the more time you spend learning and practising the better your language ability will be?

Time intentionally spent on language development we refer to as 'time on task' and it is a popular belief that language improvement is proportionate in some way to time spent on task. So, in that case, one who spends 100 hours on task will be better at a language than one who spends, say, 50 hours. Of course, in fact there are many variables that will influence the rate of progress and quality of development, but if we can imagine that two people of equal ability, lifestyle and motivation are learning a language in the same conditions with the same teacher, then it would seem reasonable to assume that the one who spends more time on task will be more competent in the language.

It may seem reasonable, but research has indicated that it is not in fact as simple as it seems.

In part, the rate at which one learns a new language and the competence one attains are related to factors such as

- Age
- Command of one's first language (L1) (mother tongue)
- Opportunity to practise the second language (L2)
- Opportunity to use the L1 as a connecting or transformative device in learning the L2, and
- Degree to which the learner admires and/or wishes to be identified with the culture and community that uses the L2.

Scenario 1: Immersion in L2 only

Let's consider a young child whose first language (Thai) is developed for the domains and purposes expected of young children (home, relations with immediate and extended family, play, simple forms of entertainment, basic formal learning of colours, letters, symbols, etc.)

If we place this child in a continuing immersion language learning situation where there is no use of the L1, the child will make rapid early progress and develop a good accent in the L2.

Over time, however, the child will be required to learn language in the L2 for objects, processes, concepts and abstract entities for which the child does not have the language in the L1 (because the L1 is used mainly in certain domains and functions, eg domestic, relational, simple information, entertainment, etc.)

The child may well become quite competent in the L2 over time, but quite possibly less so (except in oral language) than one whose first language has been developed as well and perhaps considerably less so than parents may have expected. The danger is that, without development of the L1, attainment of *interpersonal* competence in the L2 may mask weaknesses in the language required for *academic and cognitive* tasks. In other words, the child may be able to communicate well with friends and teachers in undemanding interpersonal situations, but may have difficulty with the language of more demanding academic tasks in the L2.

Scenario 2: Learning bilingually

An alternative scenario is one in which a child enters a second language learning program in which the first language is maintained and developed at the appropriate level for the child's age and stage of schooling. In this case, the child will probably make slower progress and may not develop oral skills to the level of the child who is fully immersed in the second language. However, research findings from around the world indicate that over time this child will not be disadvantaged.

From an early age the language learner will call on the L1 to assist in learning the L2. As the L1 is developed it will be called upon effectively to assist L2 learning at all stages and levels of complexity.

Bilingual language learning, where both L1 and L2 knowledge are called upon in approaching tasks, involves the two languages working together. This is known as the *Interdependence Principle* and it is a principle that appears to have been well validated by research over the past

twenty-five years or so.¹ The interdependence principle is based on the belief that there is not a separate underlying proficiency for each language one uses, but a *common underlying proficiency* that is applied to both. As a result, the bilingual learner is able to draw on both of the languages that he or she knows in order to explore and integrate new language or content.

The effectiveness of bilingual education for development of both L1 and L2 has been widely known in Europe, India, North America, Australia and New Zealand for many years and is widely used in some form in many countries. What has been found from research is that, although bilingual learners take some years to catch up with native speakers of the L2, by the upper primary years they begin to do so, initially in areas such as vocabulary development and listening comprehension. Writing and speaking take longer, of course.

¹ The interdependence principle has been stated formally as follows: *To the extent that instruction in Lx is effective in promoting proficiency in Lx, transfer of this proficiency to Ly will occur provided there is adequate exposure to Ly (either in school or environment) and adequate motivation to learn Ly.* (Cummins, 1981, p. 29)

Bilingual education has not been widely employed in public education systems in English speaking countries, however, because of concerns that are unrelated to its educational value. Basically, the reasons are related to egalitarianism (fear of doing something for one group that can not be done for all), cost saving, conservatism and political pressure. In some cases, the experience of some ill-conceived or poorly administered bilingual programs may have discouraged policy-makers.

In Thailand, however, bilingual schooling in some form is accepted widely as a suitable means of meeting this country's language education needs. We already have 189 Ministry-approved bilingual or part-bilingual schools. Much has been learned from the experience of the past 11 years and parents continue to strongly support this form of education for two main reasons:

1. It is an effective means of learning English.
2. It effectively maintains and develops Thai language and culture.

Our school draws on its experience of 11 years to make improvements and introduce initiatives that will enhance

students' opportunities to be effective bilinguals. Our goal is always *authentic bilingualism*, a deep understanding of one's own language and culture and the ability to participate in the language and cultures of the English-speaking world and the international community. This is what the 21st century demands of us.